



SNOW WHITE

JEANETTE ROSE & ALICE CALLISTO

SNOW WHITE

BOOK ONE
IN THE
EVER AFTER
SERIES

BY
JEANETTE ROSE & ALICE CALLISTO

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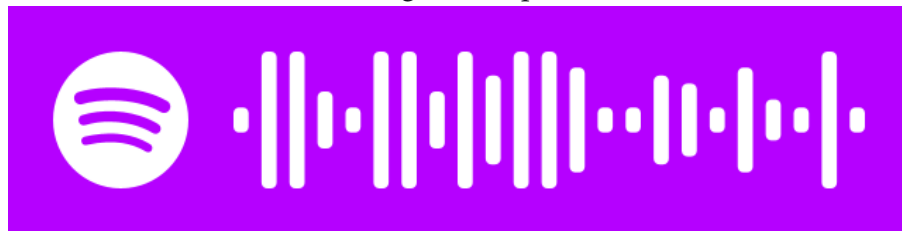
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CHAPTER ONE

AZURA



Alighting from the carriage, I clap my snow-white gloves together. The air of the Lithelle Kingdom is crisp, making my lungs burn ever so slightly from the purity. Every inch of the picturesque castle in front of me is groomed meticulously. A branch dared not grow too far out of line in the hedges, or it would be snipped by the gardeners standing at attention with shears at the ready. A footman jumps forward to place a carpet beneath my feet before they can touch the manicured grass. I wondered if they would fling themselves to the ground and allow me to walk across their backs if a rug was unavailable.

Now, now, those kinds of thoughts won't help in maintaining my disguise. I'm not here as myself. I'm here as the docile Lady Azura to compete for the king's hand. The white silk of my skirt dances around my ankles, hitting the edge of my snowy boots. From head to toe, I am clad in virginal white. With my pale hair, I glow like a shining beacon of hope.

In reality, I am the viper in their midsts.

My clap summons the two maids and three footmen who have traveled with me. Their eyes are glazed from the spell I have cast over them, but they jump to attention. The maids make sure my white dress is wrinkle-free and perfectly arranged as I glide up the stairs. The footmen scurry to take down my trunks, using the servants' entrance to enter the castle. At the door, the maids back away and follow the footmen, allowing me to make my entrance alone. I do not need any further help, not that I needed them in the first place. They are merely pawns to dissuade prying questions or annoying insights. Everything can be done with a wave of my hand.

As I glare up at the dual doors, the massive tree carved into the wood splits down the middle. My blood-red lips curl as I shove them open, not waiting for the footmen or the butler to announce me.

I wait for no man.

The opulent entryway is filled with women, some noble, some even royalty, all of them primping and preening, hoping to catch the king's eye. The doors bang hard against the walls, making several of them jump in response. My powers leech from me, slithering unseen through their vapid thoughts, gathering the intel I need. Between my first and second step into the foyer, I've soaked up all the necessary knowledge, and I recall my magic with them none the wiser.

Several of the women look me over and then dismiss me as if I am beneath their notice. But I see the way their hands clench and their eyes pinch. Some of them instinctively know that I'm more than what I seem. Not that it will do them much good. I've been practicing for this role my entire life, and I have far more on the line than some silly title. I make my steps unsure at first, faltering to a stop in the center of the foyer.

The pale dress lends a deceptive soft blush of innocence to my ivory skin, and my white hair is coiled high on my head as if awaiting the crown. My fingers twitch. It is so tempting to release my magic and send all these insipid misses home, crying to their mothers. But that would be too suspicious, not to mention it would require far too much power.

I must play the game and not reveal my position. I can't afford to be found.

I will walk over their corpses without hesitation, but I have to win first. Each step has been carefully evaluated and considered. I have to discard each of my competitors without gaining notice from within the castle or attention from without. I will succeed and claim what I need, what I crave. *Power.* Even dark magic has limits, but marrying into this royal lineage will give me access to elemental magic.

My eyes trail over the competition as some look me up and down. I don't speak to any of them. None here are worth my attention.

A butler rushes forward and leads me to the grand staircase. I glide up the steps, following him to my allotted suite for the month. A particularly loud and obnoxious girl ascends behind us, and I can't stop myself from flicking my fingers. She teeters back and forth at the top of the stairs, and

I smile as I shut the door to my room. I wonder if anyone will be quick enough to catch her before she plummets to her death. Not that it matters to me if they fail.

They're all fodder, anyway.

I take the time to refresh myself and change, but I am eager to get back downstairs. I take a few moments to check myself in the mirror. I am satisfied with how the gown hugs my curves lovingly, and the deep violet color enhances the mesmerizing shimmer of my eyes.

I step outside my room but pause at the top of the stairs. I watch as a woman with beautiful ebony skin in a pale blue dress runs into another woman. My magic leaches out to study their minds. The first is a pernicious viper, but the second... My magic slams into a mental wall of ice.

Only one woman here has that kind of mental shield.

The viper hisses, "Watch it!"

I glare down at the scene as I slowly descend the steps.

"Apologize." My voice leaves no room for argument. It has frozen armies in their tracks. Men and women bow when they hear it, even if they don't understand why. I should work harder to appear insignificant to them. Most women wouldn't demand such attention, but I've never been like most women.

The beautiful woman bows her head. "I-I'm sorry."

The other woman sniffs, turning her nose up in the air. I continue down the stairs, a predator surrounded by prey. The closer I get, the more compelling the woman in the blue dress becomes.

I am taken aback by her beauty. Her hair and skin are unbroken midnight, and I imagine stars shooting across the velvet darkness. Her hair is rebelling from the clip that holds it, tight curls already springing free around her face. I can't stop my gaze from moving down her body, and I barely prevent myself from licking my lips at the sight. I meet her eyes and almost miss a step. They are glacial, an icy blue, hinting at the power she holds within. Everything about her screams warmth and welcome, except for those eerie eyes that have the power to freeze people in their tracks.

I've seen eyes far colder.

"Not you. Her," I snap.

The other woman sputters, “M-Me?! She ran into me!”

My steps are graceful, almost unnatural. They are the only warning of the serpent beneath. “You will apologize now.”

The beautiful woman shakes her head, whispering, “I-It was m-my fault.”

I hold my hand up to silence her, my eyes locked on the viper as I finish my descent. A silent battle of wills plays between us, and some part of that stupid bitch wants to call me out. After a moment, she curtsies and says, “M-My apologies.”

The beautiful one shakes her head. “It’s alright, t-truly.”

I relax and drop my hand to my side. I hold the gaze of the rude woman, letting my magic flare. Without another word, she starts up the stairs. I turn to the beautiful one. “Princesses should never apologize.”

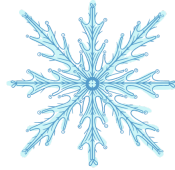
Oh, I know very well who she is. She has a role to play in my game, as everyone does. She is just as beautiful as the rumors claim, and I can feel the purity and power radiating from her.

“If you’ll excuse me, Your Highness,” I say and bow my head slightly before continuing on into the drawing room.

So begins the end of Snow White.

CHAPTER TWO

SNOW



For as long as I can remember, I have felt alone. I have my father and brother, but my mother passed away a couple of years ago from some strange illness. When she died, my brother, Eric, moved to our estate by the sea, leaving my father and me alone in this big empty castle. Since then, the hallways have been gloomy and quiet. The furniture has dulled in color. The wood chipped away by sorrow. There is very little light, and everything feels dead.

I assume that is why my father planned this event. He saw the lack of life in the castle and how it was affecting all of us... me. So, he thought if he found himself a wife, it would brighten our home again. He really isn't doing this for himself. He is doing it for me. My father has always done things for me, even if it did not benefit him. He has always been a selfless man, and I aspire to be like him one day.

Now, the castle is filled with women of all classes. All here to win my father's heart. When they'd arrived, I'd stayed up in my room and watched them enter through the front door. Their names echoed in the quiet castle. Petunia, Drizella, Louisa, and more. Each name drilled into my mind, the idea of one of them becoming my stepmother oddly exciting.

The excitement persists until I run into Drizella at the bottom of the stairs. Her face has snake-like features and her tongue is just as sharp. My body goes colder than its usual cold, and I feel frozen, unable to move as she spits vitriol at me.

It is not unusual for my core temperature to become colder than ice. I have been the Vessel of Ice since I was a baby. The element residing in my soul. Throughout the years, the element residing in my soul has taken its toll on my body. The strength of its power will sometimes overwhelm my physical form and freeze the blood in my veins. There have been times

when I have had to be placed into a tub of hot water to thaw my frozen heart.

When I look at Drizella, I can feel the coldness seep into my bones. A voice not of my own, whispering in the back of my mind.

They will never accept you. Admit it... it is better that you disappear.

But then a new voice broke through the coldness. It was sugar and spice, strong but calm. It soothes the jagged wounds Drizella's words caused and warms my blood, easing back the dangerous bite of the cold.

I let out a breath and look at the girl who stood up for me. Her white hair glimmers in the candlelight, and her skin is so pale it is almost translucent. She looks like a porcelain doll. She is perfect in every way. There is a slight blush on her cheeks, and her violet dress sits nicely on her curves. She is the most stunning woman I have ever seen in my entire life, and I want to know more about her. I want to be her friend. I want to know how she helped warm my veins.

She is heading toward the tearoom, and I only have a split second to decide whether to join her or continue watching these women from afar.

You can do this, Snow. It is time to stop hiding in the shadows.

But she might just dismiss you. A woman like her wouldn't bother with a naïve little princess like you.

I close my eyes, pushing the harsh, destructive thoughts to the back of my mind, making my decision.

"Wait up!" I call out.

The woman stops, turning to look at me with her violet-colored eyes.

"Yes, Your Highness?"

My heart thuds in my chest. The way she looks at me makes me feel as if I am the only one in the hall. I have never seen such uniquely colored eyes before, but I love them.

"May... may I join you?" I walk toward her, spinning my mother's ring around my middle finger. My mother's ring was given to me after her passing, and I treasure it. It helps me maintain control of the emotions and the subsequent cold that threatens my body. But right now, I don't even need the ring to help warm me with happy thoughts. My entire body feels hot. I wear layers to stay warm, but being near this woman makes me want to rip off my sleeves.

I have never been so nervous with someone before. It is as if her rejection could crumble the carefully built wall of hope I have wrapped around my heart.

“Of course, Your Highness,” the woman says, holding her hand out for me.

I let out a breath I didn’t realize I was holding and take her warm, soft hand. I smile and say, “I’m Snow White.”

“Azura,” she says, tucking my hand into her elbow.

We walk to the tearoom together, and it takes everything in me not to be intimidated by Azura’s elegance. She is different from the other princesses. She is mature, beautiful, and full of grace. All the power around us drifts to her, and I can feel the hum of her energy vibrating against me. It makes me want to get to know her. It is difficult to accomplish her level of composure and poise at such a young age, and many never achieve it. I want to learn to be more like her. Perhaps if I can become her friend, she will teach me.

A small group of women has gathered in the corner of the tearoom, twittering away as they work on their embroidery. Their delicate hands make quick work as they gossip about everything that has happened today. Another girl works on her painting, the picture an exact replica of the bowl of fruit in front of her. The princess beside her plays the piano, filling the space with a lovely melody.

None of those things truly interest me. I have always been drawn to activities considered more unconventional for princesses. Yet, I will need to adjust my way of thinking if I want to make friends. At least I will be able to talk to Azura. That should hold the boredom and chill at bay.

Azura looks around the room before sighing. “How about we go somewhere less occupied? Can you ride?”

My eyes light up at the thought. A beautiful, elegant woman like Azura wants to go riding? One of my favorite pastimes? My body vibrates with excitement.

“Do I ever!” I say. “I have this magnificent spot where we can go! If you are up to it, of course.”

Azura’s gaze sweeps over me before she looks down at her own outfit. “Let me change into my riding clothes, and then we can go. I can’t ride in this dress.”

Her violet dress shimmers in the light shining through the window. She nearly glows, her beauty radiant and unique, like a perfect single snowflake. My lower stomach burns with... jealousy? No, that doesn't seem right. I don't get jealous, and I have always admired a woman who could look beautiful in anything. I will have to figure out this emotion later.

"You can't?" I ask her. "I think you look beautiful."

Azura's brows furrow slightly. "It is my preference to ride astride, my dear Snow. I need my riding habit for that. It will only take me but a moment."

I nod, looking down at my periwinkle-colored dress. I wore it to impress the other princesses because nothing says princess like a puffy, frilly gown. But Azura is right. Riding in this will be very uncomfortable, and like her, I prefer riding astride.

"Should I change as well?" I ask her.

"Depends if you're planning to race me," she says, touching my arm gently. My heart flutters, and I bite my lower lip. A race? I haven't taken part in a race since my brother left. That was when the coldness sunk into my skin and my bones.

I take her hand, leading her away from the tearoom and to the stairs.

"Then I will change." I giggle.

Azura laughs as we quickly climb the stairs. She stops in front of one of the doors. "This is my room. Shall we meet downstairs?"

I chew my lip, nodding. "Alright. Promise to meet me down there?"

The question escapes my lips before I can stop it. I can't let her know how desperate I am for a companion. If she figures that out, she may think me odd. Then I will be back where I began. Alone.

Another part of me is afraid that this is all a dream and I will arrive downstairs to no one. It wouldn't be the first time I dreamed of something like this, and Azura is definitely a woman from a dream. My heart twists in my chest.

Azura blinks. "I am a woman of my word, my dear Snow."

With that, she turns around and enters her room. Once the door closes, I bolt to my room, determined to beat her down. Friendly competition never hurt anyone, right?

My maids rush to my side to help me, but I shake my head, thanking them before getting to work. The ties are harder on my own, but I manage to get them undone before slipping out of the dress. I run to the wardrobe, my eyes scanning the outfits. I pick one of the ivory riding ensembles, slipping on the pants first.

If I am honest, I prefer pants. As much as I love a good dress, pants provide comfort and ease of movement that a dress does not. In fact, I wear pants more than dresses, though I know that will not be the case this month. So, I must take the opportunity now.

I slip on my shirt, fiddling with the buttons. My fingers fumble from the adrenaline of this little competition, but I know I am going to win. I can feel it. I giggle as I grab my cloak, throwing it around my neck before bolting from the room.

Azura doesn't stand a chance.

CHAPTER THREE

AZURA



I step inside, closing the door behind me. So many of these foolish hens will click and cluck around the king's feet, hoping for some meager scrap of attention, some parcel of focus. If they knew anything, they'd know you never attack an enemy head-on. Instead, you strike where he is weakest, and his weakness stares at me with icy eyes.

Snow White. So eager to please, so desperate to make a good impression. She tumbled into my lap, wrapped in a pretty bow, waiting to be unraveled. If I yank her strings hard enough, I'll earn a kingdom and a king. But most importantly, I'll gain the power of her bloodline and enough natural magic to bring the world to its knees.

I snap my fingers, and magic fills the air as my dress becomes my riding habit. I move to the mirror to check every line, running my hands over the sleek fabric. The skirt is split in the front, revealing my black breeches and shining boots. The red hat perches on my arranged curls, artfully tilted to the side.

One of my spelled maids sits in the corner, staring vacantly out the window. My mind reaches for hers, making sure the enchantment is still in place. In her mind, she's on a quiet beach, watching the surf crash against the shore. She's deeply at peace and doesn't know that time has passed. She will never awaken from the peaceful dream, not even when I tear the heart from her chest.

My pale hair bounces in perfect curls on my shoulder as I stride down the stairs to meet my prey. I've planned every step of this from the moment I decided to marry into this family. I used persuasion to bring this

event about. From the shadows, I've pulled the strings, anticipated every event, and expected every outcome.

However, there was one thing I hadn't taken into account. Snow races down the stairs, her habit as pure as her name. My eyes lock on her breasts, the lush curves bouncing as she runs. My mouth goes dry, and I force myself not to squeeze my thighs together. This is...*inconvenient*. I was not expecting to be so attracted to her. Innocent and pure were never interesting to me. Yet, with Snow, I can't stop thinking of all the ways I want to make her beg. I can already see her on her knees, begging to touch me, pleasure me. *I wonder if her pussy will taste as pure as snow...*

"How'd you do that?" Her voice snaps me out of my fantasy.

I shoot a smirk at her. "Practice. Hurry before the sun goes down."

She blinks a few times before nodding and taking my hand again. I want to pull my hand out of hers immediately, but if I'm to gain her trust, use her to get to her father, I'm going to have to endure moments like this.

We walk hand in hand to the stables. When we arrive, I finally have an excuse to pull away. "Now, which is yours, my dear Snow?"

She nearly skips to a midnight steed, placing her hand on his nose. "This is Doc. I've had him for almost five years now."

My massive dappled grey destrier kicks and snorts as I approach. His nostrils flare wide, and his breath fogs the air as he rages at the confinement. "This is Beast."

I know what you're thinking. You're right.

Snow kisses Doc on his nose before coming to my side. She tilts her head, sending a wave of her frosted apple scent over me. "Beast?"

"He used to be the rudest of men, but he's calmed down quite a bit. Haven't you?" I ask the Beast sweetly. The horse snaps his teeth in response, and I pull my hand back just in time to keep from losing a finger. He'll pay for that later.

Snow's tight dark curls bounce as she reaches out to stroke Beast's muzzle. "He's beautiful." Beast snaps at Snow's fingers. She frowns before trying to touch his snout again.

"He's not friendly," I say.

Snow assesses him carefully, the scent of icy apples filling the air as she summons a snowflake into her hand. "I'm not sure that is true."

Beast pauses, his red eyes watching Snow warily. She waits patiently, and he takes a step closer to her. He lowers his head and nuzzles at her hand, licking up the snowflake greedily.

I raise a brow. “You should be cautious with your power, Snow. You know there are some who might want to take it from you.”

Like me.

Snow giggles softly, summoning more snowflakes for Beast, who laps them up greedily. “And who would do that?”

“There are many who covet power.” I shake my head as she continues to charm the dangerous beast. “Shall we ride?”

Snow kisses Beast’s nose. “Yes!” She leads Doc from his stall and starts to tack him, murmuring, “We are going to win this. Aren’t we, boy?”

I snicker and lift the saddle onto Beast’s back. “We shall see, Snow, don’t count on me holding back.”

She locks eyes with mine, her icy blue eyes sparkling. “You don’t know how well I can ride.”

I’d love to see you riding my face.

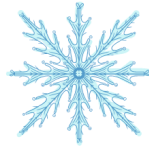
I throw myself onto Beast’s back and kick him off without warning.

CHAPTER FOUR

SNOW



“Cheater!” I shout before kicking off. Doc rears before galloping behind Azura. My hair flies wildly in the wind, my heart pounding in my chest. I laugh as I come up behind her, Doc’s eyes on the prize. We both want to win, our competitive nature thick in our blood. Eric and I used to ride horses all the time before our mother died. I would always win, and we would always end up fighting. It didn’t matter if I ended up with a couple of cuts and scrapes. It was fun, and we were together. I was happy, and so was he.



Eric races ahead of me on his caramel-colored steed he’d named Winner. Father had laughed, but Mother had only smiled and told him it was a unique name. She loves everything the two of us do, even if it is completely silly.

Now, the thing about Winner is that he is quite a lazy horse. His favorite pastime is to stand in the pasture and munch on the grass while the other horses run around. Eric goes out to the pasture to try to encourage him to run, tempting him with snacks like carrots and apples. It worked the first few times, but Winner decided that hay was much nicer than running.

Within seconds, my horse, Happy, and I race past Eric, my laugh obnoxious and loud as I pass him. I even stick my tongue out just to rub it in. Eric tries hard to catch up, but I pass our imaginary finish line just before he can pass me. I laugh and circle back.

“I win!” I cheer.

“No, you didn’t!” Eric protests.

“Yes, I did!”

“No, you didn’t!”

We bicker for a couple of minutes before jumping off our horses and tackling each other. Hands fly and legs kick, both of us ending up with bruises and cuts. Mother is going to kill us. Well, not kill us, but she will give us that look. The look that says we messed up. Though it usually ends with cookies, so I can’t complain.

Suddenly, a soft whistle echoes through the woods. I stop my punch, my fist hovering in the air over Eric’s face, and blink.

“What was that?” I whisper.

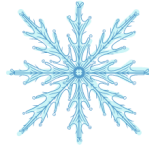
Eric shakes his head. “I don’t know but...”

He shoves me into a pile of mud before running to his horse and mounting it. “I will beat you back to the castle!”

He kicks his horse and races off.

“Cheater!” I huff.

I shake my head and approach Chestnut, but stop when I hear a soft hum drifting through the trees. The sound pulls at me, and even though I know I shouldn’t, I leave my horse and follow it.



I cut off the flow of memory. I don’t need to think about the past. Instead, I need to focus on the future. Right now, I am going to revel in the fun I am having with a possible new friend. Doc and I pass Azura and Beast, my laugh echoing through the woods. I hear her throaty chuckle from behind me, and it sends a shiver up my spine. I feel light from the excitement.

It gives me the extra push, and I squeeze Doc, urging him to quicken his pace. Together, my horse and I pass the old imaginary finish line from years ago, and I raise my hands into the air.

“I win!” I laugh, looking back at her. “I told you I’d win.”

“I’m not convinced you didn’t use your powers to beat me,” Azura says, pulling the Beast to a stop. She dismounts her horse before walking over to me and holding her arms up. Warmth fills my chest, and I grip her shoulders as she helps me down to my feet.

“I only have the ability to wield snow and ice. I don’t know how that would have helped me win,” I say with a laugh and a shake of my head.

Azura scrunches her nose, pausing when I press up against her. “I don’t believe you.”

“You think my abilities would make my horse speed up?” I ask with a laugh as I hold my hand out. A tiny snowflake appears, floating above my palm. My magic has always been a mystery to me. My mother told me she would teach me more about it when I was older, but she died before she had the chance. The only thing I have to go off of is what she told me before she passed. That I would need to learn how to control the element before it controlled me.

Azura steps back, watching the tiny white snowflake dance on my palm.

“You could cool down your horse’s muscles so he would never tire. He would be able to run harder and faster for longer periods of time,” Azura says, her brows furrowing.

I blink a few times, my mouth gaping. She knows how to work my powers? “I... I have never thought about that before. You know a lot about magic,” I say.

“I read a lot,” she says, turning away from me. She tucks her hands behind her back as she looks around. “It is very beautiful here. Peaceful.”

We are in a tiny meadow. Flowers in all colors grow around a few fallen trees, creating a rainbow effect as the sun shines down on them. The trees lining the small clearing are bigger than most, but these woods border the Mystic Woodlands. The rumor is that many strange things happen in the Mystic Woodlands due to the magic manifested by the river. So no one questions the oversized trees, and no one dares to cut them down. Not after one woodsman and his entire city suffered a plague after felling a forest giant. That was over five hundred years ago.

The sound of Doc snuffing brings me back to reality, and I loosely tie him to a tree.

“This isn’t even the best part,” I say, excitement thrumming through my body.

“Oh?” Azura questions, looking back at me.

“Follow me,” I say with a bright smile. I turn around and start to weave my way through the hedges. I am not surprised to feel her at my back.

Papa always says that curiosity gets to people.

I push the bush aside to reveal a glistening, sky blue pond. It is so clear that we can see to the very bottom. The only fish that live in the pond are goldfish and frogs that I used to catch when I was a child. The water itself must collect a bit of magic from the mystic forest. When I swim in the pond, I don't feel cold. I feel at peace. There are no voices in my mind, no chill. Just me and the water.

No one knows about this spot. I didn't even share it with Eric because this was just a little area of my own. Now I will share it with someone I hope becomes a friend.

"See?" I whisper.

"Beautiful," Azura says as she looks out at the water. Her soft smile warms my cold blood, and I have the overwhelming need to cool off. Me? Cooling off instead of warming up? Could this day get any better? Am I starting to settle into my powers? I take a deep breath and remove my shoes, preparing to step into the water.

CHAPTER FIVE

AZURA



Darkness is swallowing me whole, the pressure rising as I sink deeper into the depths. The light was further away, more and more out of reach. My hands flail uselessly, searching for something to hold, trying to swim against the kelp that wraps around my legs. The slimy plant is tighter than ropes, yanking me down and hoping to drown me. It seeks to have me join the pebbles and color fish that skirt the bottom.

I shoot a desperate glance toward the dying light and my mother standing at the lake's edge. Her face ripples above the waves, her mouth moving, but I can't tell if it is a scream or a cackle. She is so beautiful that it is almost cruel. Her pale blonde hair is like mine, but her eyes are jet black, all color completely eclipsed by the dark magic that consumes her. I know her face better than I do my own. It is in my mind at every moment, even in my nightmares. Now it is the last thing I see as I am pulled into the pressing abyss.

She can save me. She will save me. I'm her daughter. Her only child. Her legacy.

Why won't she save me?

Tears fall from my eyes, only to be swallowed by the water. Tears are useless. I know that. How many times have my tears done nothing for me? How many times has my mother looked at them unaffected? No, tears have never helped me. The kelp tightens around me, drawing me deeper beneath. It's almost peaceful, the darkness crushing me as I descend, the pressure on my lungs and mind increasing. I could just float away. Just let it happen, open my mouth, and take in that lungful of water. It would be over.

Why won't she save me?

Soon there will be nothing but darkness. Mother won't miss me. I doubt she will even notice. She has told me I'm a burden, an unwelcome consequence. I open my mouth to inhale the water, but a kelpie approaches me, its pelt glowing and sparkling. The creature shimmers in the murky water, its shining hooves cutting through the depths as easily as a heated knife through butter. It tosses its head, disturbing the bubbles and slipping forward. It's a rarity and a special gift for a colt to make itself known to a human.

She's not going to save me.

I have to save myself.

The kelpie swims closer, dancing around, thinking I'm a new friend to play with. It's a child, just like me. It doesn't know that I am the predator.

Tears mix with the water as I reach my small hand out, beckoning it closer. The kelpie makes a sound, pressing itself into my hand. I wish I could be as free as this small creature, able to roam without fear. But it's too late for me.

The kelpie doesn't see the knife until it's too late.

I shoot from the water onto the banks, coughing and choking. My little fingers are still clutching the knife. This time when the tears fall, they are black. Dark magic stains the body as well as the soul. The more I use it, the blacker I will become.

"We rely on no one," my mother purrs, gliding closer, her long gown not even touching the dirt. "We burn our enemies to ash until all know our name and tremble to look upon us. Fear is the greatest weapon there is."

I choke up more water. "What about l-l-love?"

She walks away from me as if I'm beneath her notice. "Love doesn't exist."



"What are you doing?" I frown at her, trying not to shift uncomfortably at being this close to the water. Even the shallow shores with almost

completely clear water make the air seize in my chest. I know the farther away you get, the darker it becomes.

The more dangerous it becomes.

Snow rolls up her pant legs. "I'm going to put my feet into the water to cool off."

I wish I could laugh with incredulity. Cool off? If there is anyone in danger of overheating, it's me. The thoughts of Snow on her knees, her lips begging to taste me, pleading with me, are still locked in my head. It is making my body flush with need, and the images in my mind refuse to fade.

"You can't cool yourself off with a wave of your hand?" I blink, trying to clear my thoughts. How was I this flustered just seeing her toes?

She giggles again, stepping into the water. "I prefer to feel the water on my toes. I usually come here on my own for a swim."

I tilt my head. "And your father allows that?"

She wades deeper into the water until it hits her calves. My hands fist, my nails digging into my palms. I want to wrench her out of the water. "He does."

I look down at my boots. Maybe I should take the moment to cool off. I sit down and slowly untie my boots before taking a step into the water. I have to stop myself from bolting. "Oh, it's cold!"

She looks back at me, frowning. "It is?"

I take another step in. "Just a little."

It's frigid.

She giggles. "This is one of my favorite places to come."

I glance at her, then at the water. "Why?"

"It's quiet, but not too quiet. It gives me time alone even though..." She frowns. "Nothing."

I move closer to her, our legs partially submerged and our shoulders touching. "Tell me."

She shakes her head and smiles up at me, but it doesn't reach her glacier eyes. "It doesn't matter. Let's just enjoy the weather."

My hand slips into hers, and I squeeze. What am I doing? I pull my hand away.

Snow looks out over the water. "I wish I could swim right now."

I look away, my mind wild with thoughts of her curves cutting through the water.

Droplets dripping down her breasts...between her thighs.

“What’s stopping you?” I ask, barely keeping the lust out of my voice.

“Well...” she whispers.

I turn my back to her. “I won’t peek.”

“Promise?” she asks.

I nod. “Promise.”

Liar.

CHAPTER SIX

SNOW



As soon as her back is turned, I take the opportunity to undress. How could I say no to a swim? My mind is overwhelmed by the number of people in the castle. Though the idea excites me, it is a lot for me to take in. I need to swim and relax in the crystal blue water. It will clear my mind and bring me back to my center.

After I strip my riding gear, I wade into the pond. The water cools at the touch of my skin, soothing my heated skin. A smile tugs at my lips. It is the first time I have had to use water to cool off. Things are changing. I let out a sigh of contentment as I slip beneath the surface.

Once I am further out, Azura glances over her shoulder. She is so graceful, more so than the other princesses and ladies that have arrived at the castle. It is like she was made to be a queen. It is strange to think that this woman could potentially be my stepmother when she is only a few years older than my own eighteen winters. Something about the idea makes my stomach twist, and an aggressive warmth bubbles through my veins. It is something I have never felt before, and I don't like it.

"What is it you like about swimming?" Azura asks, breaking the silence. Her question diverts my focus from the strange emotions, and I look out over the water.

"It clears my mind," I whisper, though right now, it is doing nothing of the sort. In fact, I am feeling more troubled now than before I stepped into the water. Though the other voices are silent, for which I am grateful.

"I never learned," Azura says, shrugging.

"I can teach you sometime if you'd like," I say, smiling at her.

"Why?" she asks, tilting her head to the side.

Such a strange response. Why? As in, why would I offer to teach her? Because it is the right thing to do, the kind thing. A way to make a friend.

I shrug and scoop some water into my hands, freezing it into ice.
“Well... would you like to learn?”

“What do you want in exchange?” Azura asks, blinking.

Another odd response.

“Nothing,” I say, shaking my head.

Azura crosses her arms. “You can’t possibly give something for nothing.”

“I can’t?” I ask, frowning.

“No. Everything has a price.”

Her words have me giggling. It is such an odd concept. *Everything has a price.* I giggle again, shaking my head at the idea. Has no one ever done anything for her from the kindness of their heart? I have a hard time believing that.

“That is so silly.”

“It is how the world works, Snow,” Azura says, narrowing her eyes at me.

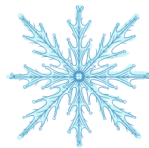
“No, it isn’t.”

“You’re naïve,” she scoffs, picking at her nails.

“I’m not,” I say, flinching as something inside me cracks.

Naïve, the voice in the back of my head taunts.

This isn’t the first time someone has called me that. In fact, Eric calls me naïve and soft all the time. The last time Eric was here, I overheard him lecturing our father that this plan to find a new wife was stupid. He was worried that any woman interested in our father only wanted his crown.



“Eric. I am not going over this again with you,” my father says, his voice rough. He sounds more exhausted than he usually does.

“I think this is still foolish. How can you trust any of these women?”
Eric hisses.

“Snow.”

“Snow? Father, she is naïve and gullible. Any of those women can figure out that the key to you is through her.”

My brother's words scratch my heart. He never used to be like this. He used to be happy, kind, and playful. After my mother died, everything changed. He took it the hardest of us all.

I clench my fist, stepping out from behind the wall. "I am not!"

My father's eyes soften when he sees me. "My little Snow."

I'd known since the beginning that his plan to marry was for me. He was attempting to find me a friend, someone to talk to other than the servants and him. After our mother's death, Eric left the castle and moved to our country estate. He rules over that section of the kingdom and ensures the pirates are kept under control. He rarely returns here unless it is for business.

While Eric ran off, I stayed and helped my father during his good and bad days. We have begun to heal, but sadness and loneliness linger in both of us. My mother's laughter no longer fills the halls, and our home feels so empty.

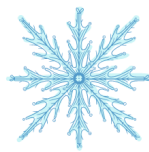
Father thought this event would be a great way to have someone else in the castle for me to talk to, and if we are lucky, we can form an alliance that will make our kingdom more prosperous.

"Father." I smile at him.

Eric sighs. "Fine. If you want to go through with this crazy plan, I shall return during it. I want to see if any of these women are worthy of you and ensure their intentions are pure."

My father nods. "I accept your terms, Son."

Eric nods, looking at both of us. A rare smile tugs at his lips as he walks over to me and pulls me into a hug. The gesture surprises me, and I lose myself. I bury my face against his chest and cry.



"Have you ever even left the boundaries of this kingdom?" Azura asks, snapping me back to the present. She is now in the shallows, the water lapping at her calves.

"No," I whisper, shrinking deeper into the water.

*Azura raises a brow before walking back to shore and drying her feet off. She had proven her point. *I am naïve*. It frustrates me that she can see*

it so easily. If she can see it, who else will notice? Will anyone want to be friends with a naïve princess like me? Or will they make fun of me like Eric? I am betting more on the latter. Even now, I feel like Azura is changing her mind about wanting to spend time with me. It stings, and my stomach sinks low.

Who would like to spend time with a silly little princess like you? You are better off sinking to the bottom of this pond.

My lip trembles slightly, but I push those thoughts away. There is still hope. I can show Azura there is more to me than being the princess who has yet to explore the world.

I spin away from her and continue my swim. Unfortunately, it isn't clearing my mind as it normally does. This whole situation is beyond frustrating as the voices in my mind go back and forth. What is wrong with me?

"We should head back," Azura says, her voice breaking the silence. "There will be an evening feast."

I don't respond to that, dunking my head under the water. She can not tell me what to do, and I won't leave until my mind has settled.

As I'm under, I hear nothing but bubbles escaping my lips. Am I fit to be a princess? Do I deserve this life? Why did my mother have to die? How can I be more like her?

I can't seem to escape my thoughts, no matter what I do. When I break the surface again, I see Azura still waiting for me.

"Snow."

"I'll make it back on time," I say before floating away from the shore. Maybe when I am truly alone, I will be able to control my thoughts.

Or join the spirits at the bottom of the pond.

CHAPTER SEVEN

AZURA



The water is watching me. The hair on the back of my neck stands up, and my skin ripples with awareness, the feeling of being watched intensifying. I make a conscious effort to keep my magic at bay. The temptation to cast a spell to ward off whatever is spying on us is nearly overwhelming. But to do so would reveal my powers to Snow, and it's too soon for her to know the truth about me. I have to be deeply rooted in the kingdom and crown to even risk that secret coming out.

Lithelle prides itself on *accepting all kinds*, but even they draw the line at those who practice dark magic. We are not welcome anywhere. We are beings that take the innocent lives of those born with magic and consume the remains to fuel our own power. We are the definition of evil, and the water remembers. It remembers what I did. Mentally, I shut down that avenue of guilt. I feel no guilt. *I feel nothing.*

"What do you mean?" I demand, trying to look anywhere but at the dark water. Even if it means I don't get to see the slope of Snow's back and the way her breasts sway beneath the surface of the pond. I have to force myself not to give in to temptation, to focus away from her.

She glances back at me, and I see the flash of her icy eyes in the reflection of the water. Her expression is so innocently coy. "I'll meet you there."

She has no idea the effect she has, does she? How could she? She's too innocent, too pure, as pure as the newly fallen snow. Snow doesn't know I'm imagining the water lapping at her waist is my tongue instead. She

could never imagine how I ache to slide between her flawless thighs. I need to take her with my mouth until tears fall from her eyes, and she shoves me away while begging me to never stop. I want her so overcome with pleasure that she can't bear to come again.

"Absolutely not," I snap, forcing my eyes to her. I will not be brought low by some pathetic water, and there's simply no way I'm leaving her here alone to swim. There is a better chance of my mother growing a conscience. I know all too well the risks a vulnerable, *innocent* being faces around dark water. I don't want Snow to fall prey to what I am. She's the purity I've never had the luxury of experiencing.

Snow frowns at me, her dark red lips tilting down. She doesn't use rouge. Her lips are just naturally that color. Just like the rest of her, her mouth is unintentionally alluring. "Pardon?"

Snow is so polite. What would a curse sound like coming from her? Some part of me wants to hear her scream out curses as I pleasure her with my fingers.

I sit on the rock and tear off my boots again, tossing them to the side. *Am I really about to move closer to her?* I stomp to the very edge of the water, holding out my hand. "Come with me."

Focus on Snow, don't look at the water. Use her as a beacon.

She moves farther away from me until the water reaches her chin. "Why? I can return on my own."

I can't leave her here in the pond alone, but how can I explain that? How do I tell her that the last time I set a toe in dark water like this, I resurfaced with the heart of a young kelpie who tried to befriend me? I went into the water as an innocent child and came out as something else. I haven't stepped into a large body of water since then.

I attempt to keep my eyes on her and off the water but do not wholly succeed.

"Snow." I emphasize the word with another step deeper into the pond.

Focus on her dark hair, the compact curls soaked at the ends where the water is lapping at them. The water. Darkness. Death.

Snow gulps, her back hitting the edge of the rocks. "You don't have to worry about me."

I force another step forward. The water drags at my breeches, soaking the heavy material and tightening it around my legs. They become a

weight, trying to pull me down. "I won't leave you alone out here."

Don't remember the pressure and the water filling your lungs. Don't think about how you nearly gave in to the need to slip away. Focus on the now. Forget the past.

She glances at my hand, then down at my clothes. "You're getting wet."

Don't look down, don't look down.

"Your hand."

Snow's eyes lock on my face, glacial eyes tracing over my features.

"You're pale."

"I'm not good with water," I grind out.

Don't look down.

She blinks and takes my hand, using her other arm to cover her breasts.

"Oh..."

I can't stop the exhale of relief as her hand curls around mine. I head back to shore, my back to her. "Thank you."

Snow lets go of my hand once we make it to shore. I keep my back to her and wrap my arms around my stomach, trying to stop the memories flashing through my head. I can hear her getting dressed behind me.

"A-Are you alright?" I stutter. Stuttering? Me?

"I am...are...you're shivering!" she exclaims and spins me around. She places her hands on my arms and rubs them quickly as if she could stave off the things in my mind. They're clouding my thoughts and fighting to push me to my knees. They want to break me in front of Snow, but I can't put this on her delicate shoulders. I can't give in to the horrors that lurk just out of sight.

I shake my head, but the movement feels jerky and unnatural. "I-I am... fine. Are you ready to return?"

The water is watching.

I feel the coolness of her hands through the fabric of my shirt as she rubs them up and down my arms. The Vessel of the Ice Elemental would have cold hands, but they don't make me shiver. Well, they do, but not in *that* way.

Focus, Azura. Stop thinking about the way you would shiver as those cold hands dragged down your heated flesh. Of those dark red lips on you...

The water is watching me.

CHAPTER EIGHT

SNOW



Azura's skin has no color, none of the blush she had when I first saw her. Her face has a slight tinge of green, and her eyes frantically scan the water. I take a couple of deep breaths, my stomach clenching. Even though she says she is fine, I can hear in her voice that she is not.

In the short time I have known Azura, she appears to have things together. Her plans are laid out before her, and everything is perfectly in place. It is as if she is three steps ahead, and she expects the unexpected.

Though, I am nothing like she has encountered before. I am not like the other princesses who choose to spend their time dressing up in frilly ball gowns and planning parties. I enjoy my freedom. Doing whatever the wind tells me to do, even when it can impact my health with the unknown chills.

"Are you sure?" I ask her, continuing to rub my hands on her shoulders, attempting to warm her. As if that will work. My body is naturally cold, and my touch can actually harm someone if I am not careful. I could freeze her into ice. As if she can sense my thoughts, Azura takes a step back.

"We should return to the castle," she says, her voice devoid of warmth. I frown as she spins away from me and stalks back to her horse.

"We can take our time! My father will understand!" I shout.

Azura shakes her head, mounting the Beast. "No."

"A-Alright," I say, hunching forward. Though I am disappointed, I have to remember that Azura is here to win my father's heart, not run around with his daughter.

Why would anyone want to spend time with you? You are nothing but a silly little princess.

“Shall we?” Azura asks, looking back at me as I mount Doc. Her voice snaps me from my thoughts, though I still feel cold. Empty.

“We shall.”

We ride in silence back to the castle, my hands tightening and loosening around the reins. I feel as if I should say something, but what? Is she upset with me? Have I made a mistake? Did I say something wrong? It is clear to me that something about the water bothered her, though I won’t press for answers. I don’t want to mess up any more chances at friendship with her, and poking around could set her off.

When we arrive at the stables, I dismount as the cold seeps into my bones. It is something that tends to happen after a swim, not to mention that my emotions are low.

“I don’t have a good time near water,” Azura finally says, breaking the silence. She dismounts her own horse and leads him into his stall. “If I seemed harsh. It wasn’t my intention.”

Her words flood my chest with warmth, and I feel that comforting fuzzy sensation in the pit of my stomach. Warm. I feel the heat from her simple words and it chases away the cold.

“I am so sorry,” I say, chewing my lip. Then, without overthinking it, I walk over to Azura and brush a soft, quick kiss against her cheek. “I still had fun.”

The blush on her porcelain skin returns. I let out a sigh of relief and give her a small smile. It is nice seeing her warm and alive like this.

“I did not mean to ruin it,” she says.

“It is alright. I hope we can spend time together again during the week.”

Azura looks at me, her eyes scanning my face. My heart flutters. I want her to always look at me like that. It is as if she actually sees me when she

looks at me. I enjoy how it makes me feel, the flutter in my stomach, my heart racing in my chest, and the heat tingling my cheeks. It feels good.

“I would like that, Snow,” she replies.

Maybe I truly have a chance with her.

I smile brightly. “I’m glad. Will I see you at the feast?”

She nods. “You should run inside. There are beasties out after dark.”

Head inside without her?

“Then we should hurry,” I say, holding my hand out for her. She threads her fingers through mine, making my heart pound. I giggle, pulling her from the stables and toward the castle. My hair is still soaked from the swim, and it is starting to freeze over, making me even colder.

We climb the front steps together, and just as we reach the top, a princess pushes open the doors. Tears are streaming down her face, and the sound of her sobs makes me flinch. What could have happened that has her in this much dismay?

My eyes narrow on her, and I notice it is Drizella. The woman's words seeped into my skin like poison. I know that I probably shouldn't care that she is crying, but my heart wrenches in my chest.

I pull away from Azura and cautiously approach the princess. “Are you all right?”

She nods, her eyes glazed over. “I’m needed in my homeland, Your Highness. Unfortunately, I cannot stay. Goodbye.”

I study the young woman. She can't just go. There must be something I can do to help her. Everyone who comes here needs to have a fair chance at this. If her homeland is in trouble, they may need help. Who am I to deny them assistance if they need it?

“Is there anything I can do to help?” I ask.

The princess shakes her head before hurrying down the stairs. She doesn't glance back as she enters her carriage. I can't seem to pull my eyes from where she stood. Is this a sign of what is to come? I wrap my arms tightly around myself, trying to keep it together.

CHAPTER NINE

AZURA



My lips twitch, and I smother a smile at the sight of the dazed princess making her way out of the castle. I forgot I had spelled her to make herself scarce while I was off at the river with Snow. It was a good opportunity to eliminate some of the competition.

I was completely focused on Snow out at the pond. Nothing else mattered, not even my terror at being so close to the dark water. The only thing that held my focus with such intensity before Snow was the never-ending need for power. It was necessary for me to feed the insatiable hunger that began as a child, fill the hole within, and always seek *more*. The dark magic satiates it for a time, but it is never truly satisfied.

The princess snuffles again at the base of the steps, but I don't even glance at the source of the sound. Instead, I keep my focus on Snow. I'm surprised it took so long for my spell to take effect. I was waiting for it to activate on this little princess, and now that it has, she'll be long gone. She fancies herself in love with her next-door neighbor, the boy she grew up with, but she will be married to some lecherous fool before the spring. She was planning to kill the king, not that I can really blame her. I have my own plans for the king, and I wouldn't be surprised if it ended with his death as well. At the moment, his future is undecided. If he is easy to manage, he'll live. If not, well, accidents happen.

I wrap my hands delicately into each other, my fingers locked. "Snow?"

Snow's gaze remains on the spot where the carriage once was. As if the rude princess who plotted her and her father's demise actually *meant* something to her. She seems perturbed by the sudden departure of that

bitch. Why does she care? The girl was rude and planned to harm *my* little princess, so I disposed of her.

“We should go inside,” I whisper, barely audible over the slight breeze.
My little princess?

When Snow’s eyes lock on mine, the cold, glacial color seems more distant, more icy. They should chill me to the bone, not fill me with tenderness or make me think about calling her back. Where are these thoughts coming from? They make me want to forget decades-long plans. She can’t be as pure as she pretends. No one can. The world takes us, destroys us, and then dares to wonder why only monsters win.

“Yes,” she whispers. Her voice is off, and I don’t like it, not one bit.
My lips pull down in a frown. “What is wrong?”

Snow shakes her head, walking up the steps to join me at the top. Her scent of frosted apples overwhelms me for a moment. “It is too bad she had to go.”

I cross my arms across my chest. “She was rude to you.”

An unforgivable offense. Those who fail to see the power in front of them will be crushed beneath its boot heel. Too many people think me weak and mild at first sight. Usually, they never get the chance to correct themselves before I’m holding their hearts in my hands.

She shrugs. “Perhaps she had a terrible morning.”

I barely hold back a hiss. I don’t like how much Snow cares about some irrelevant little princess. Her heart is going to break when she realizes the world is dark. I glance through the open doors into the palace. “They’re waiting for us.”

Snow sighs. “I’ll go change. I’ll see you at dinner.”

My hand moves almost of its own accord, clutching her shoulder.
“Snow.”

The way I say her name is soft, almost an entreaty. It is as if I am begging her to understand that I did this to protect her. I shake my head, trying to dislodge these crazy thoughts. No, I don’t care about her. I can’t care about her. But when she looks back at me, a part of me dies at the painful coldness in her eyes.

I hate the sight of it.

“Hm?” she asks, spinning to look at me.

I touch her cheek gently as if I can fix whatever just broke inside of her. How does the broken fix the broken? How does the blind lead the blind? She leans into my hand, and I want to take on all the things that are weighing on her. She forces a smile and says, "I'm just a little sad. That's all. I'll be alright."

As a professional liar, I know when people are not telling the truth, but I can see that Snow believes her own words. She's probably said them to herself so much that she's forgotten what the truth is. It is another thing we have in common.

I rub my thumb against her cheek. The small comforting move is the most I've ever offered another person. "Sad?"

She closes her eyes, nodding. "I was so excited to meet everyone."

She sighs sadly, shivering slightly, but I can't tell if it's from my touch or that her hair is still wet from the swim.

I step closer, mesmerized. "It's just one."

She nods and snuffles. "You're r-right."

I frown again. "Snow..."

Her eyes open slowly, and she shifts. I have to focus on keeping my gaze from dropping to her breasts, especially when I feel the graze of her nipples. "Hm?"

I step even closer, unable to resist the temptation. I lean down slightly and whisper into her ear, "Dinner will grow cold."

She lifts her chin, goosebumps climbing her skin. "Right."

I should step away and let this moment end, but I don't. "You're shivering."

She whispers, "My blood runs colder because of my powers. I should have dried off better."

I finally shift, putting some distance between us. "You should go then."

She blinks. "G-go?"

I smother my grin of satisfaction. "Change."

She nods, her gaze darting to her hands. "Yes, that is probably a good idea."

I smirk wickedly, walking up the stairs at her side.

CHAPTER TEN

SNOW



I keep my head low as I walk up the stairs beside Azura. There is something inside of me begging to be set free. The feeling makes me uncomfortable and uneasy. I know myself well, but the unknown emotion continues to prod at the back of my mind. If I pry at it enough, it should reveal itself to me.

Azura stops in front of her door, barely looking back at me. “I did enjoy our time together.”

“Truly?” I ask her, my mood brightening at her words. She nods, and I take her hands in mine. They are warm and soft, gentle and alluring. I don’t want to let her go. “We shall do something like that again, minus the swimming.”

“I think I would like that,” she says, looking down at our hands.

My heart flutters in my chest, and I slowly let go of her hands, reluctant to lose contact.

“See you soon!” I say before skipping to my room.

My maids quickly strip me down and help me into a tub of warm water. It is strange how I don’t care if these ladies see me naked, but with Azura, I was nervous. She is just another woman, like my maids. We have the same body parts. There is nothing different between us. But my heart flutters when she moves close to me. My core warms and pulsates when she brushes against me.

I have never felt like this toward another before. Maybe it is the excitement of finally having a friend. The gods have blessed me. She is kind and caring. My intuition tells me I can trust her.

I smile and finish my bath before stepping out of the water. The maids help me dry off as I pick a dress. I skim over my options, my gaze snagging on a dark blue one with a low neckline. Something I have never worn before.

Azura will like this one. I blink, realizing I want to impress her. I tell myself that I want her to know that I can be a worthy friend with great tastes in dresses. That's it.

Once I have finished preparing for the feast, I make my way down to the dining hall. The princesses and ladies don't spare me a second glance as I sit beside my father's empty chair. As soon as I am settled, I look for Azura. I don't see her and slump back in my seat. Did she leave? Was our trip to the pond that terrible? She did say she enjoyed herself, so perhaps she is just running late. I should check on her.

Would she really want to talk to you?

I close my eyes. *Of course.*

Just as I am about to stand up, Azura walks in. She is wearing a dress as black as night, so different from the rest of us who wore pinks or baby blues. She decided to stand out, and by the gods, does she ever look beautiful. My gaze slowly drifts down her body. Her lush breasts are straining, the material hugging her torso lovingly. She wears no jewelry, but she doesn't need it. Her skin has a slight flush that makes my mouth go dry.

I look down at my outfit. It is darker than I normally wear, but I'd chosen it with Azura in mind. How did I know she would prefer darker colors?

My father walks into the room, and I pull my eyes away from the sway of Azura's plump bottom as she takes her seat. Something has to be wrong with me. A friend doesn't admire another friend's bottom. Right? I tighten my hands into fists under the table.

"Good evening, Your Highnesses," my father says as he settles beside me. I look up at him with a smile, my brows knitting when I see the dark circles under his eyes. I doubt the others can see how sad and tired he truly is. Did he even sleep last night?

"Good evening, Your Majesty," the girls say in unison. All except for Azura. I don't know when I started to look at her again. She lifts her wine glass, pressing the rim against her plump lower lip. My heart pounds in my chest. *What would it feel like to brush mine against hers?*

Azura raises a brow at me, and I gulp, my cheeks burning. I look back down at my food. I have to stop thinking about her like that.

The women vie for my father's attention, asking about the castle and how he likes to spend his free time. I should be listening to the conversation, but I can't. Thoughts of Azura fill my mind, and I can't seem to push them out.

"Your daughter is a gifted rider," Azura says, silencing everyone around the table. Her voice is soft and smooth. I can imagine the sound of it luring me to sleep.

Lure me into her bed.

I dig my nails into my palms, trying to steady my racing heart.

"Yes, she is," my father says, a hint of pride in his voice. "I believe she is a better rider than I."

I give my father a small, if shy, smile. "Papa..."

"It is true," he says, grinning at me.

"She insisted on racing me," Azura says, smiling softly. "She put the Beast and me to shame."

My father takes my hand and squeezes it. Can he tell how nervous I am? Can he hear my heart pounding?

"So that is where you were this afternoon," he says.

"Yes, Papa. It was nice to go out."

Azura smiles. "You should be proud of her. She is a reflection of you and your late wife."

My chest squeezes, and my eyes mist at her words. I am a reflection of my mother? It is something I have always wanted to hear. My mother was a beloved queen. She helped my father rule the land with fairness and kindness. I always wanted to be like her.

My father's eyes soften, and he kisses the back of my hand. "She is just like her mother."

I chew my lower lip. All eyes are on me right now, making my palms sweaty. This shouldn't be about me. It is about my father and the princesses here that could one day be my stepmother.

"We are excited that you have all joined us," I say, trying to change the subject.

One of the princesses, I think her name is Petunia, says, "Your Highness, you must tell me what oil you use to make your hair shine. It is absolutely stunning." She strokes her beautiful long blonde hair.

“Of course.” I smile, wringing my hands together. “And please, call me Snow.”

Another princess with mocha-colored skin leans forward. “I would love for you to pick my dress for tomorrow evening’s dinner.”

My smile lessens slightly. “Of course.”

More princesses speak up, paying me compliments and asking me to join them tomorrow in the tearoom. It doesn’t feel right, though, not like Azura’s request. Their desire to spend time with me does not feel genuine.

Azura stands and, not looking my way, says, “If you will excuse me, Your Majesty. I believe I might have a slight headache from traveling today. I’ll have my dinner sent to my room if that is alright?”

My father smiles warmly at her. “Of course.”

“Goodnight,” Azura says and curtsies before gliding away from the table.

I watch as she leaves the room, my eyes straying to her bottom before looking back at the others with heated cheeks. The princesses continue to ask me questions, but the only thing I can think about is when I can see Azura next.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

AZURA



It's almost too easy to manipulate these fools. They fell all over themselves, trying to compliment Snow. They don't realize how they have overplayed their hand.

But if Snow forms new friendships from their efforts, it would be worth it.

I glance at myself in the mirror, surprise showing both on my face and in my eyes. It was one thing to dismiss — *kill* — a woman who was rude to Snow but concerned about her having *friends*? That was beyond the pale. I need to distance myself from Snow.

I sit at the vanity, my gaze locked on my reflection. I fiddle with my pale ghost-like hair, hating that I couldn't change the color.

How many years have I looked into this mirror or another and wondered what life would be like if things were different? If I knew my father and my mother hadn't sold her soul for more power. My eyes go distant in the reflection, and I wonder again if, at the end of this, I will look at myself in the mirror and not recognize myself? Will it be soon? Have I already lost myself?

The softest knock yanks me out of my reverie, the scent of frosted apples overcoming me. I pull my nightgown tighter around my body, feigning a modesty I don't have before opening the door a crack. "Snow, is everything all right?"

Her pale eyes dart over my nightgown, and she blushes even more. "Yes, I am all right. Are you okay? Are you feeling better?"

I nod. "I'm fine. Do you want to come inside?"

“Won’t you come in, little lamb?” says the wolf in disguise.

Snow bites her lower lip, her cheeks a deep, dusky rose. “I should head to bed soon. I just wanted to make sure you didn’t need anything first.”

“Oh, well, good night then,” I say, closing the door slightly to lure her closer.

She takes the bait and slips into the room, unable to help herself. “I mean, we could talk for a bit? Right?”

I take a small step to the side, my nightgown slipping off my shoulder. “Of course.”

I can feel her gaze on my bare skin, and when she looks away, I miss the cool touch. “You have one of the best views in the castle,” she says, stepping closer to the window.

I glide to the balcony, fixing the drooping shoulder of my nightgown. “I do?”

Snow joins me, placing her hand on the railing and pointing toward the courtyard. “You can see my favorite rose bushes in the morning.” She pauses. “My room looks out over this as well.”

Does she need to justify knowing so much about her own home? Or did she just provide information to fill the silence? I stand next to her, my hip cocked and my bare shoulder brushing hers. “Oh?”

She shivers slightly, and not from the cold. “You see?”

Snow points to another dark window, and I follow her direction. She wants to say something, but she’s summoning the courage. It’s obvious in the way she searches for conversation. “Hm. Did you enjoy the rest of dinner?”

She frowns as she considers her answer. “I did, but it felt empty. Does that sound strange?”

I glance back at her. “Empty? There were hundreds of women paying you compliments when I left.”

Was that not what you wanted? To have people looking at you? Complimenting you? Doting on you? Make new friends?

She tilts her head to the side. “I...hm...they just... It didn’t seem genuine? Oh, I don’t know. I must be overanalyzing.”

Of course, it wasn’t genuine. They are here to play the game and saw how successful I was using you as a pawn. They wanted to do the same but did it poorly. It is hard to imitate excellence.

“You’re right.” I laugh, gazing up at the moon. “They realized you are the key to your father’s heart. You’ll have them all trying to befriend you in the next month.”

Her face drops. “Oh.”

What is this feeling? Guilt? Impossible.

“I thought you wanted more friends.” My brows furrow as the words tumble from my mouth unbidden. “You said you wanted to meet them all. They will try now.”

“You’re right. It’s just...hm,” she mumbles, looking away.

I tilt my head at her. “It’s just...?”

She frowns, looking down at her hands. “I’m being selfish.”

“Selfish?” There is not a selfish bone in Snow’s body.

She nods, staring at her hands. “I should be grateful that these ladies would try to be my friends.”

I touch her hand. “But?”

Her glacial eyes tear up. “They are just using me, aren’t they?”

I flinch, surprised by the pain of something that feels suspiciously like my heart shattering in my chest. “Oh, Snow.”

She wipes her tears with her other hand. “I’m being foolish, right? It’s just my thoughts scrambling around.”

I can’t stop myself from pulling her into a hug. “I’m sorry.”

She breaks in my arms, sobbing softly. “I feel like a fool.”

I frown, rubbing her back. “A fool?”

She snuffles into my neck. “To think they would want to be my friends, in truth.”

I cup her chin in my hand, looking down at her. “Oh, Snow, you are so innocent.”

Pure and unspoiled by the world.

Her glacial eyes shimmer, looking up at me. “I...is that wrong?”

I shake my head. “No. Just different from most.”

She gulps visibly. “O-Oh.”

I don’t release her. “It’s better to be different. Different is strong.”

Only the sheep are led to slaughter. My mother’s voice rings in my head. *They never think to look for the wolf until it’s too late.*

Her hand rests innocently on my chest. “It’s strong?”

I nod. “It is. Be strong, Snow. Be different.”

She smiles up at me, going to her toes to kiss my cheek. “Thank you. You’re a good person, Azura.”

I manage to cut my laugh short. “You should go back to your room, Snow.”

She sighs softly and pulls away. “Will I see you tomorrow?”

I nod, tucking my hands behind my back and curling them into fists. “If you wish to.”

Her eyes brighten. “I would love that.”

“Well then, hurry off.”

She looks down at my lips for a moment. She shakes her head and smiles at me before running out. I relax my hands, feeling a slight bite of pain in my palms from where my nails cut into my skin.

CHAPTER TWELVE

SNOW



Snow is falling from the ceiling, forming a thin layer on the floor. It wakes me from my sleep, my lips tugging into a smile as soon as I see it. I can't stop the snowfall, not when I am this excited. My emotions are too strong in this moment, and I am not fully in control of my powers. I feel a pang of guilt as the maids come into my room and shiver from the cold. Surprisingly, I do not feel the chill. I just feel warm and happy.

I give the maids a soft smile of apology and dismiss them. It isn't fair of me to expect them to work in the chill of my room, and I am fully capable of dressing myself. It just takes a little longer. Besides, I want to enjoy the feeling of the snow on my skin.

For today's dress, I decide on a daffodil-colored one. Its sleeves stop at my mid forearms, and the fabric is thinner, with fewer layers. It is comfortable and keeps me warm as I go about my daily chores.

At breakfast, the princesses buzz with compliments and attempt intelligent conversation with my father. I press a kiss to his cheek before taking my seat beside him to eat my food.

The conversations continue, and someone suggests a showcase of talent for the end of the week. My father's eyes light up with interest, and before I know it, the event is scheduled. I smile at the princesses, excitement bubbling inside of me. It will be fascinating to see what these women's interests are. Perhaps I can find a connection with them through their talents.

I am practically humming with anticipation after breakfast as I make my way to the tearoom. After last night and this morning, I have more confidence, and I am looking forward to talking with the princesses who have shown interest in getting to know me.

"You can do this, Snow. You can do this," I whisper to myself.

Can you?

I grit my teeth. *Yes, I can.*

My heart flutters as I open the door, but immediately my hopes plummet into the void. The princesses all glance at me, look me up and down, and turn back to each other. Their whispers are harsh in my ears, but I listen anyway. I was wrong to get my hopes up, and the reality hurts. I felt it last night that these women were only faking it to get close to my father, but to see them dismiss me so easily is like a slap in the face, and the coldness returns.

I told you little Snow. You are nothing but a waste of space.

“Good morning, Snow,” Azura says, pulling me from my sorrow. She holds her hands out to me, but I don’t take them. My fingers are frozen, and my blood is running cold. I regret my decision to wear this silly thin dress that barely warms me. I can’t touch Azura or anyone in this state.

“Good morning,” I whisper. Azura takes my hands, squeezing them before pulling me along. Her hands are so warm, so soft, and... I didn’t hurt her with the cold? I blink in surprise, and a wave of warmth floods my belly.

“I have someone I’d like you to meet,” she says.

A smile breaks across my face as hope fills me.

“Really?”

Azura nods and leads me to a woman sitting in the corner. She is older than the other princesses here, the closest to my father’s age. The lines on her face are in places that tell me she has smiled a lot and her aura pulses with a motherly vibe. She is someone who I could spend hours talking to, and I like her already.

“Snow, this is Lady Lock,” Azura says.

Lady Lock looks up from her knitting and smiles warmly at me. She holds her hand out. “Snow. A pleasure, my dear.”

“A pleasure to meet you as well, Lady Lock.”

She laughs. “You are probably tired of meeting all these women trying to be your new mother.” She leans forward, whispering, “I am just here for the food.”

I can’t help but giggle softly. “The food here is quite good. The cook works tirelessly, perfecting each recipe.”

Azura smiles at both of us. “We were talking about what to do for the showcase.”

I tap a finger to my chin, thinking. “Well, if you would like my advice, my father enjoys learning about others. He would probably be happy to see you doing something you are passionate about.”

Lady Lock laughs. “I’m sure he would love watching me knit for ten minutes!”

I smile at Lady Lock as Azura places a comforting hand on my leg. She lowers her lips until they are practically brushing against my ear. “They’re not all harpies.”

My heart warms at the thought, and I think of how Lady Lock could do her knitting and make it spectacular. My eyes brighten.

“What if you told a story through your knitting?” I ask her.

“Hmm...” Lady Lock considers. “That might work.”

“It shows something you love. My father will appreciate it.”

Lady Lock smiles at me before she goes back to her yarn and needles.

“And what are you passionate about?” Azura asks.

“A couple of things. I love to sing, tend to the gardens, and care for animals. I mostly enjoy caring for the animals. As you know, I take pride in Doc, Happy, and the other horses,” I say. “There are also the birds Bashful and Dopey. They only visit in the spring and summer, but they can be quite demanding. I need to be careful when they are around because the cats Sneezy, Sleepy, and Grumpy try to eat them. But if we are all outside, there are usually no problems.”

“You are not fond of being indoors, are you?”

I shake my head. “Hardly.”

Suddenly, the room becomes quiet as the door opens. A petite woman with long umber hair comes strolling in. The others watch her as she moves to the back of the room, taking her seat and pulling out a book to read.

“She’s new,” Azura says.

“Is she?” I ask.

Azura nods. “Why don’t you go talk to her? See if she will join us?”

“That is a wonderful idea!” I exclaim. I jump at the chance to make another friend. As I approach the woman, she places a finger in her book, marking her spot before looking up at me. Her eyes are hazel with a mix of green around the pupil. They are beautiful, and her features are soft yet sharp. I didn’t think anyone could look so serious but kind.

“H-Hi,” I stutter.

“Hello,” she replies, looking me up and down.

I glance back at Azura and Lady Lock for strength before looking back down at the woman. “We were wondering if you would like to join us.”

The woman looks at my companions, and I take the opportunity to study her. She seems different from the other princesses, analytical, observant, and intelligent. I can practically see her mind working as she thinks.

“I would like that,” she says, closing her book and standing.

“This is Azura and Lady Lock,” I introduce the others as we join them.

“Belle,” she says, curtsying.

“A pleasure,” Azura says, holding her hand out. Belle shakes it, and I notice her touch lingers a little long. My stomach turns. Why do I feel icky?

“You’re the inventor’s daughter. Are you not?” Lock asks.

“The one and only,” Belle replies.

“Sit, sit! I love inventions. You must tell me all about them.” Lady Lock claps.

“Well, he is currently working on a device that can churn butter without the labor woman must go through to make it.”

“Fascinating!” Lock exclaims, leaning forward. “I wish I had the mind for such clever devices.”

Azura leans back, her arm resting behind me. A shiver runs down my spine as her arm brushes against my neck.

“A new friend, hm?” Azura whispers to me.

“I think so,” I whisper, looking at her.

Belle looks over at us, her eyes trailing over Azura. That knot in my stomach returns, and I clench my fists.

Belle focuses on me again. “You are Princess Snow White. Am I correct?” she asks.

I force a smile. “I am.”

Belle tilts her head. “What do you think about all these women fighting for your father?”

“If it is what makes him happy, then I don’t mind.” I shrug.

Azura shifts on the couch beside me. “I think she is wondering what would make you happy.”

Belle nods, licking her lower lip slowly, her eyes still on me.

“I um...” I gulp, the heat in Belle’s gaze making me flush. I frown.
“Spending time outdoors?”

Azura laughs. “Snow. It’s not an inquisition. They’re trying to get to know you.”

“Right... I... Sorry,” I mumble, lowering my head. I feel a mix of cold and hot in my blood, unsure of how to respond.

How can you make any friends when you fail at speaking to just one?

“You don’t have many friends, do you?” Belle asks. Her question hits me like a stone wall. I can only shake my head, afraid if I answer, my voice will betray me. Belle sighs. “Neither do I. Everyone says I’m... different, a little odd. But I suppose that’s what brings us here together today. We are different.”

“Yes. Different is strong,” Azura adds.

I smile softly. We are different, but there is nothing wrong with that. Being different has brought us together.

“Then let us do something different today!” I say, standing up.

“Like?” Belle asks.

I tap my lower lip. “Hm...”

“Archery?” Azura suggests.

“Archery?” I tilt my head. “I’ve never—”

Belle stands, interrupting my train of thought. “Perfect idea.”

Azura stands and holds her hand out to me. “I’ll teach you.”

I give her a small smile and take her hand.

“I’ll just observe and support,” Lock says with a smile as she puts aside her knitting.

The four of us leave the room to prepare for our little adventure.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

AZURA



Snow's delicate fingers interlace with mine, and I don't pull away. I should, but I don't. It is reassuring that she still clings to me even as I introduce her to Lock.

Attachments mean vulnerability. Vulnerabilities mean weakness. Snow is a weakness.

After that moment of clarity, I try to pull my hand away, but Snow only holds on tighter. "Is it foolish that I'm more excited than I should be?"

Belle shakes her head and wraps her arm around mine. "Not at all."

Belle is what I prefer, and something stirs in me when I look at her. She knows the score. I can see it in her eyes. This world broke her at some point, just as it does everyone. Everyone except for Snow. Somehow, even through the hardships, she has endured and remained untouched by darkness. She invokes something in me, something I thought was long dead.

I study her profile from beneath my lashes, my stomach twisting at the idea of the world breaking her. Despite her chill, she fills my body with *warmth*. What is my fascination with this princess? I need to focus. I *need* power at any and all costs.

I glance at Belle with veiled interest, especially when her hold on my arm grazes the side of my breast. From the way her back arches and her nipples bud in her dress, the touch was *very* intentional. I purr, "Let's go."

Belle smiles, but her eyes turn hooded, locking on my lips. Snow's back is to us, and I can barely stumble along as she yanks us forward. I suppose seduction can wait for now. A laugh tumbles from my lips, deep and

throaty, the sound surprising me. It is one of the few times I've laughed without intending to. The sound is without artifice and strange to my ears.

"You're excited," I say to Snow, my smile clear in my voice as we arrive at the archery field. My hand is still locked with Snow's, while Belle is wrapped around my other arm.

Lock pulls over a small chair, resuming her knitting along the side of the range. Usually, I would have eliminated a woman like Lock. She's too close to what I know the king is searching for. He's not looking for a young, nubile bride like I expected. He's looking for someone who possesses a stalwart heart and a clever mind to grow old with.

Unlike his daughter, he doesn't have natural mental walls and is easy to read. If I try to touch Snow's mind, all I feel is ice, her thoughts shrouded in a frozen fortress. Maybe that's why she's so intriguing to me. Those kinds of walls only come when you're blessed by one of the Elementals.

Snow smiles softly at Lock, releasing my hand to spin in a circle. "This is something I've never done before."

I smirk, disentangling from Belle to pick up a bow. "Come, I'll show you."

Belle settles on the grass next to Lock's chair, opening her book. Snow glides over to me, the sun gilding her skin in gold. I keep my gaze from dropping to the lush swell of her breasts straining against her dress. But it's a close call. Even her walk is unknowingly alluring. She tilts her head and asks, "You know how to use one?"

I know how to use all weapons. But I find words to be the most effective.

My lips twitch. "I did have a life before arriving."

I hold out the bow to her. She nibbles on her lush lower lip before taking it. I glide behind her, pressing her back against my chest. My hands cover hers, guiding her into position. I could slide my hands up and cup her breast.

She shifts against me a bit more, moving closer. "L-Like this?"

I nod, brushing some of her hair over her shoulder and covering her hand on the bowstring. "Now spread your fingers on either side of the arrow, pull it back until it touches your cheek."

Like I'd spread your dripping folds apart for my tongue.

She follows my instructions, glancing at me. "Like this?"

I nod and press her elbow down. “Now picture the arrow going into the target.”

She closes her eyes for a moment and takes a deep breath before opening them to lock on the target. “Done.”

My lips brush against her ear as I whisper, “Let it fly.”

She shivers and releases the arrow. It misses the center but lets out a satisfying *thwonk*.

“Oh.”

I can’t help but laugh again at the way her lower lip is sticking out. “That was amazing for a first attempt.” I shoot a glance at Belle. “Belle? Would you like a chance?”

Belle licks her lower lip, placing her book down. “I’d love to.”

I grab another arrow and claim another bow for Belle. Belle’s gait is sensual, her hips swiveling provocatively. From the ways she’s watching me, it’s completely intentional. I squeeze my thighs tightly together. Between holding Snow so close and Belle’s inviting gaze, I can feel myself dripping.

Think you can play in the dark, Belle?

Belle’s fingers brush mine as she takes the bow from me. I don’t move as she positions herself in front of me. My mouth hovers at her ear, and I nip it lightly. “Now, keep your back straight.”

Belle smirks, pressing her ass against me. “Like this?”

My hand moves to readjust her hold, brushing against her breasts as I pull back the string. “More like this.”

“Are you sure it’s not like this?” Belle whispers coyly, rocking against me.

I barely register the sound of Snow’s next arrow hitting the target again.

My hand relaxes on the bowstring again, using the movement as an excuse to drag my fingers over her nipple. “More like this.”

Belle gasps and lets go of the string, the arrow flying. It goes wide, missing the target. I smirk and take a step back, putting distance between us.

Belle blushes, grabbing another arrow. “I meant to do that.”

I nod, still smirking until I catch the way Snow frowns, her hand tightening on her bow as she watches us. We are being too obvious, but it would look strange *not* to help Belle.

Belle takes the opportunity to brush her ass against me again when I correct her form.

We need to make this private.

I lick Belle's ear, whispering to her, "Tonight."

Snow drops her bow and arrow with a clatter, announcing, "I must tend to the horses."

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

SNOW



This new emotion I am feeling is only growing bigger and stronger the longer Azura keeps her arms wrapped around Belle. I don't understand it. These sorts of things have never bothered me to this extent. Yet, when I see Belle press herself against Azura, a fire ignites inside me. The extreme heat bubbling in my stomach makes me feel like I need to take an ice-cold bath and cool off. I hurry from the field with my fists clenched.

"Snow?" Azura calls out. I ignore her, walking over to Lady Lock instead.

"I hope you have a lovely afternoon, Lady Lock," I say before spinning on my toes and storming off to the stables. I don't look back at either of them, angry, for only the gods know why.

At the stables, I grab a pitchfork, scooping the manure and mud into a wheelbarrow. I can feel my skin freeze over, the aggression turning my blood to ice. This emotion makes my powers spiral out of control and I can't seem to find any warmth.

Deep breath in. Deep breath out.

I repeat the mantra, though it doesn't help. My blood feels hard under my skin, as if it has stopped moving. Is this how I die?

"Snow?" Azura's voice rings out.

She followed me? Why? To gloat about how wonderful and beautiful Belle is? I hiss in my head. I blink a couple of times, my chest tightening. Where is all this coming from?

It is because you know you are not worthy enough for a woman like her.

I growl to myself, grabbing my saddle and putting it on Doc. Azura appears at the stall, her beautiful white brows knitting together when she sees me.

"Snow?"

"Hm?" I huff, continuing to prepare Doc for a ride.

Azura places her hand on my shoulder. "Talk to me."

"Why? You should be with Belle," I hiss, looking back at her.

Azura blinks, tilting her head. "Are you upset with me? I thought you wanted more friends?"

"I am not upset. I never get upset," I huff again. That is a lie. I am upset that Azura isn't touching me the way she touched Belle. I grit my teeth at my thought.

"Oh, really?" Azura says, crossing her arms over her chest. She is too intelligent, and I know my expressions and actions are betraying me.

"Really."

Azura grabs my arm, and a shock of comforting warmth flows through me. "Snow."

"Yes?" I sigh, finally looking at her.

"Talk to me. We were all having fun, and suddenly you stormed off," Azura says, placing her hand on my cheek. I lean into it and close my eyes for only a moment.

It's because I wanted you to touch me. I wanted you to keep your arms wrapped around me while I practiced my shot. Not Belle. Me.

I frown. "I just... I'm scared."

"Scared?" She blinks.

I lower my voice. "What if you like Belle more than me? What if you both decide I'm not g-good enough?"

"Snow. I thought you liked Belle?" Azura asks, sighing heavily.

A child. She thinks I am throwing a tantrum like a child. This must be a disappointment for her. The princess of the king she is trying to woo is a child. I squeeze my eyes shut.

"I do," I mumble.

"But you don't like me with her?"

My brows furrow. "I... now that you say it out loud, it sounds silly of me."

"You're jealous," Azura says, tucking a lock of hair behind my ear. The action makes me shiver.

"Jealous?" I blink. "No... I have never been jealous before. That's not like me."

Azura laughs. "I'm guessing I'm your first friend, correct?"

“Yes,” I mumble, my cheeks heating as I look at the ground. I am so embarrassed to admit that to the one person who has taken the time to get to know me. My behavior could ruin that chance.

“You’re worried about me having other friends?” she asks.

“I’m... I’m worried you won’t want to be my friend anymore.”

She laughs again. “I still want to be your friend. I promise.”

I wrap my arms around her neck, holding her tightly. “I’m sorry.”

“It’s alright, Snow,” she says, holding me for a moment before pulling back. Her purple eyes swirl as she looks into my own. They are truly beautiful, and I could stare at them for hours.

“Thank you for speaking with me,” I say with a sigh. “I promise to not react like that again.”

She nods before looking down at her dress. The beautiful fabric is covered in mud and hay. “I suppose I should change while you go on your ride.”

I giggle softly. “Yes. I’m sorry.”

Azura leans forward, brushing her lips against my cheek. My heart stops in my chest. They are so soft and warm. “I’ll see you later.”

She spins and leaves the stable. I let out a breath as my heart starts up again once she is out of my view. It pounds against my chest, blood pumping so loud it’s the only thing I can hear. I wonder what it would feel like to have her lips against mine.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

AZURA



I need relief from the arousal created in my archery lesson with Snow and Belle. Snow was the subtle and natural seduction, while Belle was aggressive and straightforward. Inside my room, I slip into the tub, idly wondering when Belle will join me. It only takes a couple of minutes for the knock to come.

I sigh. “It’s open.”

Belle closes the door quickly, the scent of red roses following her inside. I hate that I miss the smell of frosted apples. “Your instruction was quite interesting, and I thought we could have a private lesson.”

The sound of the lock sliding into place makes me lick my lips in anticipation. A distraction is just what I need. A meaningless fuck to get my mind off Snow. I glance over my shoulder at her. “During my bath? That would be highly irregular.” I take in her dilated eyes and slightly parted lips. Her breasts are shaking with shallow pants. I crook a finger at her. “Come here.”

Belle saunters onto the low dais, her hand touching the rim of the tub. “I don’t take commands lightly,” she says, her eyes flashing with defiance.

I turn my back to her, grabbing a loofah. “Feel free to leave if you object. I’m sure there will be others more than willing to amuse me.”

“Like the king’s daughter?” she asks coyly.

I turn back to her. “Snow? I doubt her *tastes* are as diverse as ours.”

Belle fiddles with the ties of her dress. “She is very innocent.”

I watch her slowly undo her laces, the fabric of her dress sagging. “Not like us.”

Belle smirks at me. "I think I will listen to your commands, Azura." Her dress falls, puddling at her feet and leaving her naked. "Unless you've changed your mind."

I crook my finger at her again, and Belle shivers before stepping into the tub with me. I growl into her ear before biting the lobe. "Pick up the soap and clean me."

Belle obeys, rubbing the soap in her hands and spinning to face me. She soaps my shoulders and down my chest. I place my hands on the side of the tub and relax, allowing her to touch me. Her lips are soft as she leans forward and kisses the tops of my breasts. Her hands move to my hips as she straddles my legs, grinding against me as if she's in heat. She's trying to rub her way to an orgasm, practically frothing at the mouth for it, and we've barely even begun. I haven't even touched her yet.

My smile is positively evil, my voice harsh. "I did not give you permission to rub yourself against me."

She moans again, licking my nipple softly in apology. "No?"

I grip her hair in my fist and shift her off of me. My voice is dark and low as I say, "You will pleasure me, and when I feel you deserve it, I'll finally fill that ache in your core."

She giggles, biting her lower lip. "Is that a promise?"

I nod, and she nips my nose, attempting to rub against me again. My hands tighten on her hips. "Finish. Cleaning."

Belle whimpers and grabs the soap again. Her hands are trembling from unfulfilled need. She obeys, cleaning every inch of my body as I silently watch her. When she finishes, she lowers her head and wraps her lips around my nipple.

She sucks hard, and I groan. I arch my back, my hands digging into her hips. "Good girl."

She tries to roll her hips again, but my hands keep her still. She sucks harder, making me moan. I growl, "So disobedient."

Belle releases my nipple with a pop, looking up at me with hooded eyes. "Let me rub against you."

Her voice is ragged, desperate, but I still deny her. "You aren't needy enough yet."

"Please," she whimpers.

I lick my thumb leisurely, and her gaze locks on my movements. I drag it down her body, circling her nipples slowly. Her breath comes in shaky gasps, and she writhes against me. I smile and slide my hand lower, teasing over her swollen clit. "I want you mindless."

Belle jolts and her eyes roll back. "Yes, my lady." She buries her face back into my chest, working my breasts. She sucks one, then the other, trying to please me enough so that I'll let her come.

My thumb continues circling her clit, not giving her the pressure she so desperately needs. She whimpers again, her moans sending pleasant vibrations against my nipples.

I spin her in the bath again, yanking her back against me. I growl into her ear, "Put your hands behind my neck."

Belle spreads her legs, her hips rolling as if out of her control. She reaches up to lock her arms behind my head, leaving her open and vulnerable to me. "Yes, my lady."

Such a good little whore she is.

My hands take a slow tour down her body, my teeth sinking into her shoulder. I use my knees to keep her legs wide and cover her core with my hand, my fingers dipping between her folds. "Your pussy is dripping, like a good girl."

She whimpers, arching her back, trying to get more of my touch. "F-Fuck."

I tap her clit with one finger and cup her breast with my other hand, pinching her budding nipples. "Such a needy girl."

Belle's hips roll, and she pleads, "More."

I bite her shoulder again, tapping her clit in rhythm with my fingers on her tight little nipple. Finally, I thrust two fingers inside her and twist them. She spreads her legs even wider, and I whisper, "Just like that."

Belle squirms on me, mewling and moaning, desperate for release. I yank my fingers out of her before she has the chance to find it. She gasps. "Why'd...why'd you stop?!"

I wave my hand, a strap-on appearing from one of my toy chests. I move her off me and step out of the tub to strap it on, moaning as I insert the piece on the harness inside me. While I fuck her, it will fuck me.

Belle walks over to the bed and lies on her stomach, putting her knees on the edge as she spreads herself for me.

I rub the edge of the strap-on along her soaked folds before plunging inside her. “Such a greedy slut.”

Belle moans and tosses her head. “Fuck me hard, my lady.”

I reach forward and fist her hair. I yank her head back and snarl, “Take every inch.”

My hips flex, moving faster. Belle is so wet I glide in and out easily. I moan at the feel of the pressure against my clit. Belle’s eyes close, and her hands fist in the sheets as she moans, “Yes...”

I rotate my hips and release her hair, hitting even deeper inside her. “Beg me to come.”

She pushes back against me, meeting my thrusts and mewling, “Please, please, please.”

“Almost,” I whisper, tossing my head back and biting my lower lip.

She whimpers. “Fuck...please, my lady. Please, let me come.”

I gasp and order, “Come.”

“Fuck! Azura!” Belle screams, and I send my magic out to seal the sound to my bedroom.

I feel her tugging on the strap on, the delicate muscles of her pussy contracting. My orgasm electrifies me, pleasure ripping through me in waves. I pant and pull out, collapsing on the bed next to her. Before the haze of lust clears, I press my hand to Belle’s head, altering all memory of me using magic.

Belle pants, her body still shaking from the force of her climax. She closes her eyes and smiles. “Well...”

I glance at her dismissively. Why is she still here? I carefully undo the straps of the toy and toss it to the side. “Hm?”

Belle rolls onto her back. “That was nice.”

Hm. I did not see Belle being the *clingy* type. This could present a problem. It was just sex. We were both pent up and needed an outlet. There’s nothing more to it. It’s why I chose her over the person I really wanted.

Snow would never accept an exchange of pleasure, and if it were Snow in my bed, her skin flushed and dewy, I wouldn’t be pulling on a robe and standing right now.

“Why are you still here?” I snap at her.

Belle narrows her eyes, rising to her elbows. “Are you serious?”

I hum to myself, sitting at the vanity, dismissing her. She can feign hurt all she wants. She knows this was just a casual fuck.

“So you just needed a quick fuck?” she says, sitting up.

I barely stop myself from rolling my eyes. Why is Belle acting so hurt? I glance at her coolly. “Are you saying you didn’t enjoy yourself?”

She visibly bristles. “Maybe I am.”

I toss my head back, unable to contain my cold laugh. “I could put my hands on you, and you’d be begging for more.”

Belle grits her teeth and storms past me into the bathroom, no doubt to dress. “Fuck you.”

Good, she’s leaving. “Oh, and Belle? A word of this to anyone, especially Snow, and...” I trail off. Some threats are better left to the imagination.

Belle yanks her dress on, tying the laces. “I don’t fucking care. Lock me away, Azura. That won’t change who you are, and Snow will figure it out.”

I laugh coldly again. “Who said I’d lock you away?”

“Bitch!”

Belle yanks her dress tight before storming to the door. She throws it open to reveal Snow.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

SNOW



I stand frozen in confusion, trying to understand what I am looking at. Azura and Belle together? Is Azura only in a robe? Why is their hair disheveled? My stomach clenches, and I have to fight the onslaught of tears threatening to spill down my cheek.

See? You were nothing but a burden to everyone around you...

I squeeze my eyes shut, pushing the voice to the back of my mind.

"I... I thought we c-could go to d-dinner together," I whisper, my throat feeling tight.

Azura glances at me. "Of course, Snow. Give me a moment. Belle was just leaving."

I shake my head. Unable to face her any longer, I turn and walk away. I don't understand what is happening, but every part of me hurts as if a thousand pins and needles are violently stabbing into my chest. I can't breathe, and I tug at my corset, trying to loosen it.

I hear Azura calling for me, telling me to wait, but I can't. She can't know how much this has affected me. I don't want her to see that I am in tears over something simple like this. She is allowed to have friends other than me. After all, she did say she would always be my friend, right? So my reaction to finding her with Belle is just silly.

Azura catches up with me, grabbing my cold arm into her warm hands.

"Snow."

"I know. She is much smarter than I—" I mumble.

She touches my cheek. "Look at me."

"I just... I don't understand," I continue on, finally looking back at her. "She called you a... a...."

Bitch. The word shoots to the front of my mind. She called Azura a bitch. Why? What happened? Were the two of them fighting? Did I see the

situation wrong? My mind whirls with questions, and I feel light-headed. Azura sighs, pulling me against her chest and hugging me tightly.

“She was upset,” she says.

“W-why? Because of m-me?” I ask.

“You? What could you have done?” she asks, kissing the top of my head. My stomach settles, the knots loosening and relaxing. The warmth of her kiss floods my veins, and my body feels lighter.

“I was jealous earlier,” I whisper.

Azura cups my chin, tilting my head to look at her. “Oh?”

“I-I should go speak to her.”

“Why?” Azura frowns.

“She must hate me.”

“How could anyone hate you?” she asks me. Her voice is so genuine and clear that tears fill my eyes again.

Who doesn't hate me?

Azura didn't see the looks of the other princesses in the tearoom this morning, and I know they would stomp on me the first chance they got. They would throw me in the mud and leave me to rot. I could see the hate written on their faces. And yet they are here for a chance to marry my father. Will they look at me differently when they are chosen? Or am I a fool to believe any of them could like me?

“I... I... many do,” I choke out, wiping the tears from my cheeks.

“Fools,” Azura scoffs.

“One of my maids says those who hate me are jealous, but I don't understand why,” I say.

Azura tucks a lock of my hair behind my ear. “Then they are twice fools.”

I snifle, searching her eyes before wrapping my arms around her neck. Her words soothe me like nothing else in this world. They comfort me like my mother's hugs used to. They are a warm blanket pulling me in and protecting me from the world. I feel steady and grounded in her presence, and all my sadness slips away with a simple hug.

Azura smells of freshly cut orchids. It is my new favorite scent, and I know I will always associate it with her. I want to run my fingers through her hair as she presses hot kisses against my neck. I want to feel her soft porcelain skin against the dark ebony of mine and marvel at the beauty in

the difference. My fingertips ache to explore every inch of her lush body as I lay beside her.

“You smell pretty today,” I murmur.

“It’s my soap,” she says.

Her words ground me back to the present, and I quickly pull away from her, all the available heat going to my face.

“Right, you... look... refreshed.” I let out a shaky breath. “I... I’ll meet you downstairs.”

Azura touches my hand, heat radiating from the spot. “Snow, you don’t want to speak to Belle?”

No, I want you to pin me against the wall and run those plump red lips down my neck.

I quickly shake my head, panting as the thoughts continue to penetrate my mind. What is wrong with me?

“Dinner. Food. Need to eat,” I squeak out.

Azura looks down at herself, and it takes me a moment to realize she is wearing nothing under that robe. Liquid heat drips between my legs, and I gulp.

“I’ll get dressed and meet you,” she says.

I look away and nod before running off. My breath is heavy in my chest, and warmth pools in my core, creating an empty ache that I know only Azura can fill. These thoughts of Azura and the sensations they create scare me. They aren’t right, and I shouldn’t be thinking about her in this manner. I need to get a hold of myself before my imagination gets me in trouble.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

AZURA



I am the last to arrive for dinner, and I take the open seat between Snow and Belle. My scan of Belle's mind leaves me satisfied that my spell erased the memory of our fucking. I barely had time to craft the spell before Belle opened the door. For now, the memory of us arguing over something meaningless replaces it, but her mind is stronger than I expected. I shore up the walls of the spell, making sure it doesn't falter. I'll have to keep checking them. If Belle remembers, she could truly destroy all my carefully laid plans.

Belle is a threat, and I should eliminate her. All threats to me gaining this power must perish before they have the time to grow roots. Usually, I don't rely on fallible memory spells that can be broken by a strong mind.

Memory spells are draining and require constant maintenance. Normally, I would have simply disposed of her, but something stayed my hand. Some unwelcome thought prevented me from ripping the heart from Belle's chest and eating it.

What would Snow think if one of her treasured friends vanished?

The intrusive thoughts press into my mind, though none of the struggle shows on my face. Since when do I care what Snow thinks? If Snow wasn't so fucking... *innocently seductive*, so fucking alluring, I wouldn't have been so tempted by what Belle offered. I wouldn't have fallen so easily into the honey trap between Belle's pale thighs. I would have fucking *resisted*. But all I could think of was Snow. She was all I could see. I put my mouth on Belle and dreamed it was the taste of frosted apples. Snow's scent, flawless skin, and... well, fuck everything about her calls to me. I

should despise her innocence and attempt to corrupt it, making her just like everyone else, just like *me*.

Snow is not the target!

Marrying Snow would not give me the powers I need. *Marrying her?* When did I start to consider that? Still, my face remains blank, even as my mind reels.

“Azura, I apologize about earlier,” Belle murmurs, thoroughly contrite. Her shoulders are hunched, her tan cheeks flushed. She apologizes, even though I can hear her thoughts, and she isn’t exactly sure if she should be apologizing.

I glance at her, feigning a gentle smile. “A simple misunderstanding between friends.”

You were an itch to be scratched, nothing more.

I rarely go back for seconds, but with Snow, I doubt I’d be satisfied with only once. It isn’t like me at all, but I’d go back for seconds, thirds, and fourths. I really need to get her out of my head.

Belle nods, even though I can hear the churning in her mind. She scratches at the mental barriers in her memory. I grind my teeth and rebuild them as Belle turns her attention to Snow. “Are you sure you’re all right, Snow?”

I follow Belle’s gaze, frowning when I see Snow poking at her food, moving it around the plate instead of eating it. I open my mouth to comment, but the king enters, his smile magnanimous. “Good evening.”

He is handsome, I suppose. His dark skin is lighter than Snow’s, less awe-inspiring, but he looks far younger than his years with broad shoulders and narrow hips. He is charming and likable, yet he resorted to this to find himself a queen. I know I pulled the strings, but I never truly considered his motives. I scan his thoughts, disengaging from them with a pang. He wants Snow’s help to pick. He values his daughter’s thoughts and wishes that much.

The other women flutter, trying to catch his attention. I take Snow’s hand while they’re distracted. “Snow?”

She doesn’t look at me but slips her hand out of mine. I have to stop myself from flinching as something that feels like *hurt* blossoms in my chest. Instinctually, I reach out to touch her mind, only to slam into those icy walls. I want to burn those walls with dragon fire, to finally know what

lurks in her mind. Yet, I can't. I'm not powerful enough to fight a Vessel for one of the Elemental Spirits. Not yet.

"I assume you have all heard about the showcase this Friday?" the king asks, smiling at the women around the table. The room is abuzz with noise and excitement at the prospect of being able to display a unique skill in the hopes of catching his eye. I barely hear the exchanges around me, focusing instead on Snow's hand. The hand she pulled from mine. The hand I want to grab back.

"I am excited to see what you all come up with, though I do have some bad news," the king adds.

That has my attention.

"Oh? What news, your majesty?" my voice borders on saccharine, unable to force the elegant tones I usually use. Most of my focus is on measuring the exact distance between my hand and Snow's.

He sighs heavily. "I will have to depart for a week to deal with some business."

"Nothing too serious, I hope?" I ask, forcing my face to display some slight concern. I draw my brow down, a slight wrinkle forming on my forehead, and force my eyes wide with sincerity. It is a mask, hiding the emotions I am actually feeling.

The king shakes his head. "Nothing at all. Just some formalities. The good news is my son will be here to look after you all."

I stop myself from recoiling at the mention of his son and Snow's older brother. Prince Eric is the Vessel of one of the original Elementals. His mind will be as clouded to me as Snow's is. If Snow is a frozen fortress, Eric's will be a stormy sea. I am not a fan of that many variables.

"I thought your son was away in the seaside castle," *where he should stay*, "but I'm delighted to have the chance to meet him. If he's half as charming as your daughter, I am sure we will be fast friends."

Or mortal enemies.

The king nods, visibly softening toward me. I can hear his thoughts and know I've moved forward this round, leaving most in the dust. Concern for his children is his primary focus, and displaying it so openly will push me further.

"Let's eat," he announces.

All of us resume our conversations, everyone except Snow. She remains silent, moving her dinner around and then her dessert. The moment it is acceptable, she stands from the table. My eyes lock on her as she kisses her father's head and says, "I will speak to you later, Papa?"

He nods at her, patting her hand. "Yes, are you all right?"

She nods and smiles, but it doesn't reach her eyes. "I am fine. I love you."

He frowns. "I love you, too."

I have never wanted to read Snow's thoughts more than I do at this single moment.

Belle notices as well. "Did our fight upset her?"

"I have no idea, but I intend to find out."

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

SNOW



The events of the day continue to nag at my mind. I struggled through dinner, the self-recriminations and worries stealing my appetite and joy. I feel as if I am losing two people who I think are my friends, and I can't seem to stop my improper thoughts of Azura. They fill me with heat and need, all the cold in my system fading away. The moment she sat beside me at the table, my heart pounded and my stomach clenched with desire. I wanted to straddle her lap and press my lips against hers right there in front of everyone.

The gods know I try to push these thoughts from my mind. Truly I do, but her sweet floral smell overwhelms me. The heat her body radiates draws me, a promise of warmth against my cool skin. It is so hard for me to focus when she is near. I don't understand why thoughts of her continue to consume my mind. Gods, I wish I understood. Right now, I want to flop onto my bed and relieve the ache between my thighs.

I sit on the edge of my bed and gather my skirts, pulling them up to reveal my legs. The soft knock on the door makes me freeze, pulling me from my carnal thoughts. "Snow?"

I gulp and drop my skirts, wringing my hands together. *She* is here. Oh, gods. What am I going to do? Will I be able to control myself? My need for her is growing stronger, and I am not sure how much longer I will be able to hide it. Will she pin me to the wall? Run her hands up my sides? No, she wouldn't. I should ignore her until my mind settles, but I can't. I need to see her.

I walk over to the door, opening it with a smile. "Azura. Hi."

"What's the matter? You left abruptly," she says, frowning. My eyes drop to her breasts. They strain against the bodice of her dress, practically begging to be released. The way they press together makes my mouth water, and all I want to do is bury my face between them. Her necklace lies

delicately just above her cleavage, and I wonder what she would look like with nothing on but that.

The molten heat between my legs is practically gushing at the thought. I shake my head to clear it and clear my throat before saying, "I um... I wasn't feeling well."

"Hm," Azura says, raising a brow. She crosses her arms over her chest, pressing her lush breasts closer together. I bite back a moan. The gods are testing me. I have always been a good girl and done what I am told. I do my best to help others and have never had an impure thought. But when it comes to Azura, I want to take her into my mouth and taste her delicate skin.

I close my eyes, chewing my lip. "No... that's a lie. I um..." I can't tell her the truth. "I have a lot on my mind."

"Tell me," she says, stepping into my room.

Oh gods, oh gods! Lay me down on that bed, and I will tell you everything.

"I just..." I wring my hands together. What is my other issue again? Right friendship. "I'm scared."

"Scared?" Azura asks, moving over to my tea tray. She pours me a cup of tea, and I let out a breath.

Focus on the tea. Focus on friendship.

I sit at the table and take a deep breath, regretting it when her scent invades my senses again.

"I thought I could become f-friends with B-Belle and you. Yet, I am s-scared I am not good enough," I murmur.

I am scared that when you find out these dark thoughts, you will think me dirty and run away.

Azura holds out the teacup. "You are very good."

Am I a good girl? My thighs clench.

Oh, gods, not again.

"Thank you," I whisper, shifting in my chair.

"Why are you scared about not being good enough?" she asks, sitting across from me.

I look down at my cup, focusing on how the tea leaves swirl in the liquid. "I have never been good enough before."

"Why do you say that?" she asks.

I look up at her. "You are my first friend." I take a sip of my tea. It is warm and soothing. "Clearly, I wasn't good enough for anyone before."

"Snow," she scoffs.

"Yes?" I sigh softly.

"Why do you think people's poor taste reflects on you?"

"Would it not?" I ask, blinking a few times. "There must be something wrong with me."

And if there is something wrong with me, if people don't like me, can I ever be a good queen like my mother?

You can never be like your mother.

My throat tightens at the thought.

Azura scoffs, looking at her nails. "Please."

My lips curve in a small smile, her words comforting me once again.

"Thank you, Azura."

"For what?"

"For making me feel better." I let out a long sigh and say, "Tomorrow will be a new day, and the three of us should start fresh."

No jealousy. No improper thoughts.

"The three of us?" Azura asks, tilting her head.

"You, Belle, and me."

"Ah." Azura places her teacup down and stands.

I smile brightly at her as an idea comes to mind. "I will see you tomorrow?"

"If you wish." She nods.

"Yes! Please!" I squeal, hugging her quickly. Thank the gods my thoughts don't wander. "Inform Belle that we shall all meet in the tearoom tomorrow. Alright?"

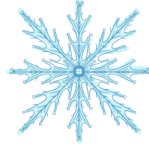
"If that is your wish," Azura repeats.

I nod again. "It is."

Azura hums, moving to the door. "Sleep well, my dear Snow."

"Goodnight, Azura!" I call out as she leaves.

This is good. Tomorrow we will start anew, and everything will be back to how it was the other day.



The soft sheets drag over my nipples, making them grow hard. They ache, and I slide my hands over my stomach, caressing my ebony skin and rolling my hips. I sigh in relief as I pinch them hard, needing something more than just my hands on me.

Then I feel the warm breath on my inner thigh, soft lips trailing higher and higher. A moan catches in my throat, and I grip the sheets as cool air washes over my clit. I ache to be touched there, rubbed, kissed, licked.

“My little princess is so needy,” Azura purrs. “Look at you. So wet for me.”

I roll my hips, my eyes watering from the need.

“Azura, I...” I moan loudly when I feel her tongue roll over my clit. Her hands grip my thighs, holding me open. I reach down and grab her hair, holding her mouth against me. Nothing has ever felt this good before, not even my fingers. Azura’s tongue is wicked, and she knows how to work it. She laps at my folds and teases the sensitive skin around my opening. I cry out and arch my back as she stiffens her tongue and thrusts it inside me. Pressure builds deep in my core, and I squirm in her grasp, seeking release.

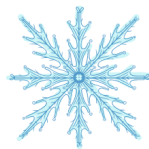
“You will come when I say,” Azura growls against my clit. “Not before. Not after. Understood?”

I nod, rolling my hips. “Yes, my queen.”

Azura pulls back to smirk up at me. “Good princess.”

She lowers her face and carefully grazes her teeth over my clit before sucking it into her mouth. I pull at the sheets, tossing my head back and forth. My legs shake, and the world spins as I struggle to hold back my release.

“Come,” Azura growls.



I sit up in my bed, sweat coating my body. The ache between my thighs is unbearable. I lay back down, panting as I place my fingers on my clit

and rub quickly. An explosion of ecstasy rips through my body, and I arch my back, my legs shaking. I rest my hand on my stomach, gasping for air as my body settles.

What am I going to do?

CHAPTER NINETEEN

AZURA



I have fallen into a morning ritual in my days in the palace. I arrive first at the tearoom, conjure a steaming cup of coffee, and stand by the window. The hair on the back of my neck raises as I gaze at the trees. If I focus enough, I can hear the roots moving, tearing through the earth as they approach the castle. The forest is surrounding me, surrounding *Snow*, as if preparing for an invasion.

The woods call to me, and I know it's nothing good. Only evil calls to me, and it sets me on edge. Considering what I grew up with, nothing should make me this anxious. My nerves should be made of steel by now. Yet when I look out at those trees, I can feel eyes looking back at me. So many little eyes. Evil little eyes.

"Ladies!" Snow calls out, running over to me as she does every morning. Her cheeks are warm with her exuberance, and her eyes are sparkling. I do not want to admit that I wake up early every morning to get the best view when she comes running in. I can't help the way my eyes lock on her bouncing breasts as she runs. They press against her corset, barely contained and desperate to escape.

I smile softly at her. "Yes?"

Belle closes her book. When did she arrive? Snow's smile is bright. "I have something for the three of us to do today!"

One of the princesses stares at Snow and whispers something to the woman next to her. They laugh, the sound mean and nasty. Snow's shoulders slump, and some of her joy dims. My gaze snaps to the princess,

such menace exuding from me that she shrinks in her seat. I look back at Snow. “You were saying?”

She glances up at me, wringing her hands together. “I...um...in the woods...I set something up, but it’s silly.”

“Nothing is silly. Tell us,” Belle huffs.

Snow gulps. “Can I... Can I show you?”

I raise a brow and straighten, satisfied with the way the other women instinctively shift away from me in fear. Fear is the biggest compliment.

“Of course,” I answer smoothly, my voice slicing through the room. I see one of the more timid ladies tremble at the sound, and I have to stop the smirk from forming on my face.

That is right, tremble before me. Know that I am the monster you should fear.

Snow holds her hands out to both of us, and Belle takes one. Belle whispers, “Are you all right? The other day you seemed—”

Snow smiles softly at Belle and says, “That was nothing. I am feeling much better today.”

Snow drops her hand when I don’t take it. She frowns slightly but leads us out into the woods where she’s set up three easels. The feeling of being watched increases, especially within the trees. I wrap my arms around my stomach and glance around, expecting someone to jump out and accuse me of forgetting everything I’d planned. I am here to seduce the king. Instead, I have allowed myself to be distracted by a dark-skinned girl with icy eyes.

“I, um... I thought we could just paint and laugh and not care about anything,” Snow says, twisting her fingers tightly. Her bright smile had faded, losing more and more of her inner light as we made our way outside. Again, I instinctively reach out to read her mind, only to press a hand to her icy shield. When I withdraw from her head, I have to stop myself from physically shivering from the psychic chill.

Belle tilts her head to the side, sending a wave of her red rose scent into the air. “I’ve never painted before.”

Belle’s scent does nothing but remind me I should kill her, especially when I constantly have to fix the mental wall of memories in her mind. Last night she’d almost torn them down.

I whirl on my heel as I hear something from the woods, my hands out, ready to cast a defensive spell. There's nothing there, and I let the black magic die before anyone notices.

I'm losing my mind.

My smile is forced as I turn back to Snow and Belle, but I hope it covers my unease. There is no way I will let anyone or anything take Snow from me. I will stand guard, and I will analyze that instinct another time.

"I'm not much of an artist either, but I'd love to watch."

"Well, I rarely paint either, but I thought we could just try it?" Snow whispers. My poor anxious princess, desperate for acceptance and friends.

Wait, *my*?

Belle walks over and grabs a paintbrush. She dips it into the paint and says, "Let's do this."

I nod at them both reassuringly. "Go on."

They laugh as they start to paint. Snow appears to try for a bird but uses too much paint, and Belle's attempt at a rose turns into a blob. Neither picture is decipherable.

Belle huffs. "This is much too hard."

Snow laughs. "It looks beautiful."

My magic flickers in my hands, but I am careful to keep it hidden from Belle and Snow. Their painting soon turns into a battle as they flick paint at each other instead of the canvas, delighting in the day.

I smile softly at them before returning my attention to the woods, my eyes scanning as everything in the forest goes quiet. The sounds of birds and insects vanish. Even the flowers in the grass stop moving.

"Snow? Belle?" I position myself to better protect them. "I don't believe we are alone anymore."

Belle flicks paint at me. "Worrywart."

Snow giggles, and I tense, scanning the horizon. Snow laughs again. "How about we wash up for lunch? I can get someone to fetch this when it dries."

I nod, keeping my back to them. "Let's."

Belle and Snow link hands, walking back toward the palace, as I trail behind. I tense at the door and look back over my shoulder.

The trees are even closer now.

CHAPTER TWENTY

SNOW



Over the next couple of days, Belle, Azura, and I spend our free time together. Much of it is spent in silence in the tearoom, and surprisingly, I don't mind it. I always thought that people had to be speaking at every moment to enjoy friendship, but these silent moments are nice too. It feels good to have another presence in the room. One that I feel comfortable going to if I have questions or I need another's opinion.

Belle is truly intelligent. At our urging, she has told us of her father's inventions. Lady Lock is always very interested in hearing about them. Belle knows how each machine works. If she put her mind to it, I am sure she would be able to create any of them or even create her own.

I gave her access to our private library, and so far, she has read at least eight books. That is at least six more than I could read in a couple of days. She absorbs information like no other. If I ask her a question from one of her most recent reads, she can recite the information as if she is reading from the book itself. I am thinking of telling my father to make her an advisor if he doesn't choose to marry her. Her type of gift should never go unnoticed.

Azura, on the other hand, is as quiet as ever. Her poised and elegant beauty grows daily. Luckily, I have been able to control my thoughts. Only at night do I allow them to wander as my hand strays down my body. She has no idea that she has left me tongue-tied on several occasions. Then again, I do stutter when I am nervous. So, it is not strange that I would trip over my words when my gaze drops lower than I should allow.

As for myself, I have felt less cold. I feel like I am slowly settling into my powers. After eighteen winters, I finally have the confidence to control my body temperature. My power is not controlling me, but I am controlling it. The voices are also quieter in the back of my mind. Some days I don't even hear the dark thoughts.

I let out a long sigh as I flip through my book. Today, Belle and I went straight to the tearoom. There has been no sign of Azura, but I assume she will be arriving soon.

Only two women have been sent home since the competition began. The first was sent away due to rumors of her conspiring to assassinate my father after the marriage. Instead of sentencing her to death for her treason, he sent her home. There was no solid evidence, and we didn't want to risk a war.

Her betrayal truly shocked me, and I made a mental note to stay aware of the other princesses. The other woman that went home was an awkward girl. She is barely eighteen, and my father personally felt uncomfortable with the age gap, so she was sent packing.

Even with the two fewer women in the room, the environment is still abuzz with conversation. It is draining to listen to side conversations all day. I discovered that yesterday when listening to three ladies talking about different corsets. I nearly passed out from boredom.

Azura glides into the room, and my head instantly snaps up. It is as if I have a sixth sense where she is concerned. Her eyes are sunken, dark circles surrounding them. She looks exhausted. I smile warmly at her, trying to brighten her day.

"Good morning, Azura," I say.

She nods at me before pouring herself a cup of coffee and moving to her usual spot at the window. Every day she sits there and stares out that window. Curiosity pinches me.

"May I ask you something?" I ask.

"Hm?" Azura looks at me, lost in thought.

"You look out the window every day. Is there something you are looking for?"

"The trees are whispering," she says, returning her gaze to the forest.

Belle raises a brow and joins Azura at the window. "Whispering what?"

"I don't know, but it makes me uneasy," Azura says, scanning the trees.

"Well, we are safe in here. Yes?" I say, wrapping my arms across my stomach, feeling a bit sick. The way she says those words makes the hairs on the back of my neck stand up.

"Inside the walls, yes."

"Then we will stay here," I say with a nod.

“We have a lot to prepare for,” Belle adds.

Belle and Azura have been preparing for the showcase. I helped Belle and Lady Lock with their ideas. It is exciting to be a part of something, and I enjoy helping my friends.

“Yes. Prepare,” Azura murmurs, her mind still lost in her thoughts and her gaze still on the trees.

I gently take her hand, trying to pull her back to the present. “Do you know what you’re going to do tomorrow?”

“Tomorrow?” She blinks, looking down at my hands. She must not have been listening.

“Yes. For the showcase,” I say, tilting my head.

“Oh. Yes. I do.”

“Are you going to tell us or keep it a secret?” Belle asks, twirling a lock of her hair.

“A secret,” Azura says, looking back at the trees. “You?”

“A secret.” Belle smirks. It isn’t a complete truth since she’d told me bits and pieces of her plan.

“No fair! I want to know,” I whine. “I have been helping you here and there, and I deserve to know.”

“Too bad.” Belle laughs. “You’ll see the final product tomorrow.”

“Uh-huh,” Azura mumbles. She lifts my hand to her mouth, kissing my knuckles. I blink a couple of times in surprise as my heart beats faster and the heat rises in my body. It is a comfortable warmth that signals my mind to replay every inappropriate thought I have had about her.

Oh no.

“Well,” I clear my throat, making sure my smile stays in place, “I am excited to see what you both do.”

Belle looks between us, smiling softly. “Should we go get some lunch?”

Azura drops my hand. “I’ll catch up.”

The cold replaces the warmth of her touch. It is the first time in a couple of days that I have really felt it.

I sigh softly and nod. Belle grabs my hand, but her warmth just isn’t the same. The two of us make our way to the dining room. As we eat, I keep an eye on the door, waiting for Azura to walk through.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

AZURA



My gaze is drawn to Snow the moment I enter the dining room. The flavor of frosted apples teases my tongue as I lick my lips. I was distracted in the tearoom and focused on the forest, but surely I wouldn't have forgotten my first taste of Snow.

"Your Majesty, a surprise," I say, taking the seat next to Snow and smiling warmly at the king.

I catch his scent for the first time and realize this is the closest I've been to the king. His scent of pine and sea is a strange combination. The notes war with one another and are not pleasing to the nose, nothing like frost and apple.

He's the target, not his daughter. I gain nothing by being with Snow, no magic, no power. Marry the king, and I will gain the powers of the kingdom. But first, I must stop thinking about Snow.

I bite my tongue to keep from licking my lips again and force my gaze to remain on the king. He is handsome, with no lines of age evident on his face. He retains the glow of youth that his daughter radiates. His eyes are a warm brown, welcoming and inviting but not captivating. With broad shoulders and narrow hips, he is clearly active and enjoys physical pursuits. I should be pushing my clear advantage. My friendship with Snow has already aided me, but I haven't exploited it to its full extent. I could end this entire charade if I used Snow, but something is stopping me, my hackles rising at the thought.

The king bows his head, the single braid at his temple shifting with the movement. "I thought I would come and talk to you ladies in person."

Snow scoots her chair closer to her father, concern filling her icy eyes. “What is it, Papa?”

My protective instincts go on alert, responding immediately to Snow’s discomfort. “Is something wrong?”

“My son will be arriving in a couple of hours,” he says, something close to dread lacing his tone. I had heard quiet rumors involving the prince, but by all accounts, the royals are a close-knit family. I slip into the king’s mind, gathering intel.

He said he would test the princesses’ loyalty, but can I convince him to stay? I hate that he’s alone in the seaside castle, but he refuses to be inside this castle for longer than a few days. The king’s thoughts, as always, focus on the welfare of his children.

I raise a brow, feigning ignorance. “Ah, the famous Prince Eric, but why are you so sad, my dear?”

The king sighs. “It means I’ll have to leave you all soon.”

“That is bad news. We have had such little time to get to know you,” I add, lacing my tone with a regret I don’t feel.

He forces a smile that doesn’t reach his eyes. “It will only be for a couple of days. Then I’ll be taking each of you out on a one-on-one activity.”

It was a thought I’d implanted into his mind last night. It would give me time to manipulate him further, out of sight of the other women. I raise a brow. “You make it sound like a chore, my dear.”

The king smiles. “It won’t be. I already have activities planned for each one of you.”

I smile wickedly and lean against the table, pushing my breasts against the wood. “Activities, hm?”

The king smiles, and to his credit, his eyes don’t drop to my chest. He opens his mouth to respond, but a call from the doorway pulls his attention from me.

“Father!”

The voice makes me grind my teeth. I know a predator when I hear one. Every nerve in my body ignites, preparing me to strike out against him. These are *my* prey, no one else’s.

The shift in the room is not just in my imagination. All the king’s thoughts become clouded to me. His entire mind is nothing but a

whirlwind of sea and salt. *Eric.*

As he approaches, his scent surrounds me. He smells like the ocean, bringing to mind crashing waves and whipping wind. Everything unstable and chaotic begins and ends with water. This man is the Vessel for one of the oldest Elementals. *Water.*

His power is so great that he's masked his father to me even though his father is not a Vessel. I had *not* counted on his presence being that strong. I despise surprises.

"Eric! You're here early." the king smiles, his eyes a little sharper. His chest is puffed out, and he nearly glows now.

Eric smirks, very much a younger version of his father. He has the same broad shoulders and narrow hips, just as attractive but infinitely more dangerous. Unlike his father, who inspires with his smile, Eric's smile is full of lies.

I can see the similarities between him and Snow. They have the same dark skin, and though Eric's hair is cut tight along his temples, it is wild at the top like hers. But that's where the similarities end. Her eyes are ice, while his are a storm. I don't even need to read his thoughts, not that I could, to know what is going through his head. He's empty, just like me, going through the motions and feeling absolutely nothing.

He slides into the seat directly across from Snow. "Father, I heard there are numerous beautiful ladies here. How could I not come as soon as possible?"

Eric's gaze sweeps the table. Several of the women twitter beneath his focus. He winks when he looks at me, and my hackles go up. We are two predators hunting the same prey.

My smile turns cutting, my voice as frosty as the ice in his sister's mind. "Ah, the prodigal son, a pleasure."

A few of the princesses giggle. Princess Amirah calls out, "Is it true that you sailed around the continent in just ninety days?"

Eric smirks. "It is."

I can barely keep from rolling my eyes. Eric is the Vessel for the Elemental of *Water*. Of course, he's going to sail around the world in record-breaking time when he's in his *element*. Praise for undeserved feats rankles me.

“Is it true that you can hold your breath longer than any other man?” Princess Liza asks.

Again, the answer should be obvious.

“It is,” Eric says, his smirk never dropping. “But ladies, this isn’t about me. It’s about my old man.” Eric slaps his father’s shoulder, making his father laugh. The king’s eyes sparkle when they rest on his son, a heart-wrenching hope in their depths.

“You are a handful,” the king says.

Belle leans over, whispering into Snow’s ear, but my focus remains on Eric. I lean back in my chair, surveying him as I fold my hands in my lap. Everything about Eric is *wrong*. The way he holds himself, the way he smiles, the way he laughs, all of it is just off.

The king stands and announces, “Well, I have some things to attend to. I am excited to see what all you ladies have planned for tomorrow. I will see you all then.”

I nod at the king but know better than to take my eyes off an enemy. Eric smiles, waiting for his father to leave before asking the women present, “Who would like to give me a tour of the gardens?”

I slowly stand from the table. “I’m sure many of the women here would be delighted, Prince Eric. But as you said yourself, this is not about you. If any of these women were smart, they’d let you wander around the gardens you grew up with, *alone*.”

With my head held high, I turn toward the door. Eric calls to my back, “Can I not make friends, my lady?”

I look over my shoulder at him, my laugh frigid. “The distractions won’t help, you know. That pit inside you will remain.”

Eric’s face darkens. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“You keep believing that,” I say, holding his gaze. I turn and, without glancing back, slip from the room.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

SNOW



Seeing my brother made me happy in the twenty seconds before chaos followed. I love Eric dearly, but when women are around, he can be a tad full of himself. Yes, he is doing this to weed out the unloyal from this event, but most likely, he will enjoy it. It irks me slightly that he has this power over people. Women crowd around him like bees to honey.

There are two women he did not fool. Azura and Belle. Is it terrible it makes me happy that they didn't fall for his charms? Belle whispered that she thought I was the better sibling, and Azura had a confrontation with him within minutes. They chose me over him.

Someone has chosen me. I grin at the thought.

A princess with carrot red hair slips into the seat beside Eric, pressing her breasts against his side. Belle refers to Veronica as a *classic bitch*. Rumor has it that she sleeps with men, then steals their money as they rest. We haven't been able to prove it yet, which is why she is still here. Why she would do this when she is a princess from a prosperous kingdom who wants for nothing, I do not know. Belle hypothesized she did it for the *thrill*.

"Don't pay attention to Azura," Veronica says. "She acts as if she is better than all of us."

"I like the way you think," Eric says, faking a smile and looking down at her. He surprisingly avoids looking at her plump breasts and lush curves. Has my brother grown as a person since he left home?

She giggles and trails her fingertips up his arm. "She acts as if she is already queen and has been since the moment she arrived."

"No, she hasn't." I frown, surprised by the sound of my own voice. Belle places a hand on my arm. My blood turns icy hot in my veins, and I have the urge to get up and smack Veronica across the face.

“Yes, she has. She acts like we should all obey her,” Veronica hisses.
“She’s not even a princess.”

“Well, she has been nicer to me than all of you. That makes her a better match.” I stand, an emotion I haven’t felt since I was a child flaring to life inside me. Anger. The world turns red as pure anger burns an icy path through my soul.

My brother tenses and looks down at the woman clinging to his body.
“Is that true?”

“What does it matter?” Veronica mutters, pouting up at my brother. Alright, it isn’t a secret that my brother and I have our disagreements, but any woman in this room should know that Eric will not tolerate anyone mistreating me. This woman just signed herself up for an early grave. My anger dies as quickly as it rose, pity taking its place.

“That’s my sister.” He shoves her off him.

“I have been polite!” she exclaims.

Lie.

“I suggest you pack your things,” Eric snarls at her before turning his attention to the rest of the women. His expression only softens when he notices the comforting hand Belle has on my arm. “Ladies. Take note that my sister means the world to my father and me. We don’t stand for anyone treating her with anything less than respect. So, if I hear that someone is snipping at her or spreading rumors, prepare to pack your bags.”

I look down at my hands, heat spreading through my body from embarrassment. Eric is the prince... no *king* of embarrassment. Though it is a kind gesture, I am sure that his little speech will only make things worse.

The rest of lunch is awkwardly silent. I can’t stand to be the center of attention, especially when I don’t know what everyone is thinking after my brother’s lecture. As soon as I can, I split from Belle and make my way to Azura’s room. I take a couple of deep breaths to calm myself before knocking on her door.

“Yes?” Azura’s voice rings out.

“Can I come in?” I ask.

“Of course, Snow.”

I smile to myself before opening the door. My heart stops in my chest. *Gods. Oh, my gods.* She is only in a robe, rubbing lotion into her pale legs.

They look so smooth and completely hairless. I want to run my hands up her thighs to her sweet center.

My cheeks heat. The thoughts have returned in full force, and there is no calming them. Not when her breast is about to slip out of her robe. What would her nipples look like? Would they be like mine? Tight and perky? Will goosebumps form as I run my fingers over them? I need to know. I must know.

I squeeze my eyes shut, closing the door behind me. "I... um... I..."

"Yes?"

"I um..." I gulp, slowly opening my eyes. "I wanted to apologize for um..."

For staring at you and thinking about all the ways I could taste you.

"Apologize?" Azura says, straightening.

"Yes, um... my brother." I close my eyes. *Yes, that is why I came up here.*

"Why would you apologize?" she scoffs.

I blink a few times, wringing my hands together. "I um... hm."

Why can't I form a single coherent thought?

"Why would you apologize for him?" she asks. She stands, and the shoulder of her robe slips, revealing more bare skin. I feel my face heat and my belly clench as the damn liquid between my thighs rolls down my leg.

"He's my brother," I choke out.

"And not your responsibility," she says, stepping forward and touching my cheek.

I press my face into her hand, staying silent for a couple of minutes. I know I should be thinking about what she is saying, but it is so hard when she smells this sweet. The need to stay close to her nearly overwhelms me.

"You're so warm," I whisper.

"And you don't like that?" she asks.

"I do. I always feel cold," I whisper. "Not that it bothers me, but I just... Your warmth feels nice."

She frames my face with her hands. "How about now?"

"Perfect," I whisper, a shiver running down my spine.

"Why were you apologizing?" she asks, rubbing her thumbs against my cheeks.

“I just... I didn’t like how it ended.”

“Your brother doesn’t like me, I’m assuming?” she asks, dropping her hands from my face. My heart sinks. I am bereft without her touch.

“Actually, I think he does.”

“Oh?” She laughs.

“He kicked a princess out after I, um... I stood up for you,” I say.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

AZURA



I'm shaking off the feeling of salt air on my skin from being in Eric's presence when Snow finds me. I can still smell his briny scent burning my nose.

"Stood up for me?" I ask, raising a brow in confusion.

I don't think I recall anyone ever doing that. Everyone feared me, as they should. I am known as the *Wicked Bitch*, the monster parents teach their children to fear, the wolf in sheep's clothing. Snow sees none of that. She only sees the good. It's going to break her when she finds out the truth.

Why does the idea of hurting her hurt me?

Those glacial eyes that so intrigue me will crack and break when she discovers my plans for her father. They'll turn dull and lifeless. She'll be just like everyone else, broken by the world.

Broken by me.

She nods. "I told Eric that out of all the princesses, you were the only one who was nice to me. Then Veronica bickered with him, and he kicked her out."

I'm using you, Snow. Why can't you see that?

Snow is the key to the king. Before Eric's powers masked his mind, I saw that my friendship with Snow was putting me far ahead of the rest of the competition. Yet, Snow is too pure to see my artifice.

I shrug at that, adding, "Hm, so he's not as empty as I thought."

He's worse than empty. He's a storm with skin. Eric is on the verge of imploding, and no one else seems to notice.

Snow lets out a breath. "I think you'd like him. He isn't terrible."

Eric isn't terrible. He's a mirror held up to my face. He's what I would have been if I had a loving family, a doting father, and a warm mother. If I'd been chosen to be a Vessel, Dark Magic wouldn't have been a part of my life. But, even if things were different and everything in the world was provided to me, I would still have a hole in my heart. I hate Eric for showing me that. I hate how alike Eric and I are.

I scoff at Snow. "He has a giant hole inside."

Right in the middle, just like me. Snow has never noticed because she thinks the best of everyone.

"No, he doesn't," she says, her lush bottom lip sticking out and her brows furrowing stubbornly.

"You don't see it, do you?" I murmur.

Snow huffs, the smell of frosted apples escalating in the room. "No."

I draw a circle on my chest, right over my heart. "Big hole right here."

Just like me.

Just like Snow will have when she finds out the truth. I'll break her.

Snow steps closer and takes my hand, pressing my palm against her chest. I have to stop myself from moaning at the feel of her lush curves beneath my touch. "What about me?"

"What about you?" I whisper hoarsely, trying not to pull her closer.

Run away, Snow, before I hurt you. See the monster that lies beneath.

She tilts her head to the side, sable curls falling over one shoulder. Her voice is a whisper that makes me lean forward, seeking more of her. "Do I have a hole too?"

I should move my hand away. I will. Any second now.

"Do you feel empty inside?" I ask, already knowing the answer. She feels lonely and lost, unaccepted and outcast. But it's not the same as emptiness, and she'll learn the difference, eventually.

She frowns, closing her eyes, and focusing on her emotions. "I... a little."

I laugh softly, kissing her hand. "Do you try to fill it with useless relationships? Drugs? Alcohol?" *Black Magic? Power?*

She shakes her head. "N-No."

I feel the rapid beat of her heart beneath my palm. "Because you're not empty inside."

You're nothing like me. I fill the void with hatred and darkness, and still, nothing helps.

Yet, with my hand still on her, I can't help but feel achingly *present*. I am more in touch with this moment, with myself, than I can ever remember being.

She moves closer to me, going on her tiptoes before pulling back. "Thank you."

It takes me a moment to realize she has backed away. "Thank you?"

She nods, giving me a small smile. "You always make me feel better."

"You're welcome," I say, though my stomach twists. If my plans are successful, I'm going to end up as her worst nightmare.

Wicked bitch. Evil sorceress.

"I will see you at dinner?" Snow asks.

Build walls. Push her away now before it's too late.

It hurts me to do so, but I have no choice. I have made my bed, and now I must lie in it. There is no path forward for me other than the one I chose.

"I might not come down."

She pauses at the door. "Why not?"

I move back to my vanity, resuming lotioning my legs. "I'm not feeling up to company."

She looks down at her hands. "Oh... I shall leave you then?"

Don't say it. Don't say it.

"If you want to come back with your dinner, I wouldn't mind," I blurt.

Damn it.

"Just me? Or Belle as well?"

Just you.

"Whichever you would like," I say, burying myself deeper and deeper into Snow's life. The more time I spend with her, the closer we become, and the more betrayed she will be. But I can't seem to stop myself from craving more of her and her refreshing innocence.

She smiles, and I hate that I feel a rush of joy from having brought her that tiny measure of happiness. "I would. We will come back for dinner."

I force myself to look away, going back to my legs. "If that is your wish."

"Y-Yes... I... see you then." I force myself not to stare after her as she runs from the room.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

SNOW



How I kept control of my body, I do not know. Every inch of me was yearning to touch Azura's silky smooth legs and run my fingers through her silver hair. The liquid from my core drips down my thighs, making the walk to Belle's room challenging. The ache in the pit of my stomach continues to pulse. I would give almost anything to have Azura help me soothe it.

I inhale deeply, trying to calm the overwhelming hunger. I need to behave myself and push these thoughts from my mind before they make me do something I will regret.

After collecting our meals, Belle and I return to Azura's room. Belle has been a little more silent since the conversation in the dining room. I wish she would tell me what is going on in her mind, but I know not to pry for answers. Both she and Azura prefer to take the time to process. She will tell me how she feels when she is ready.

I open the door to the bedroom and step inside. "Hi, Azura. I hope you don't mind! I should have knocked first."

"Hm?" Azura says, looking back at me. She is standing out on the balcony, the waning sunlight caressing her body. She is truly radiant.

"Are you alright?" I ask her as I hurry to Azura, placing my hand on her lower back.

"They're closer." She shivers and looks back out at the trees. I wrap my arms around hers, trying to soothe whatever is bothering her.

I look out at the trees, swaying under the moonlight. The wind rustles through the leaves, singing their nightly lullaby. Sometimes when I close my eyes, I can hear them calling my name.

Come to us, Snow. Come home.

I shiver and turn my attention back to Azura.

“Perhaps it has something to do with the upcoming harvest moon?” I ask.

She shakes her head. “You don’t feel it? Like you are being watched?”

“I have always felt it,” I whisper. The sensation of being watched feels like two burning holes at the back of my neck. Whenever I am outside, the sensation can become intense. It feels like a hot steel rod is being placed against my skin. Not to mention the voices that have only ceased to speak the last couple of days.

“You have?” Azura asks, glancing at me.

I nod, pulling her back into the room and over to the tables. “Yes, but I have never been bothered by it.”

“No?” Azura asks, glancing once more toward the balcony.

I shake my head, sitting down beside Belle.

“You know,” Belle begins, looking up at me, “if you feel like somebody’s watching you, you are probably right. You should inform your father.”

I frown. “Why would I do that? It is only a silly feeling.”

“It’s not,” Azura says, shaking her head.

“Well, what should I do?” I ask.

Belle bites down on a carrot stick. “Tell us when this began.”

I press my lips together, looking at both of them. In all honesty, I don’t remember when I first truly felt like I was being watched. The sensation has been with me for so long that it’s become comforting. It is like I have a protector watching over me, telling me the harsh truths of the world. Though how it began and where it started... I can only think of one event that could have started it.

Azura covers my hand with hers. “It’s overwhelming.”

I nod, chewing my lip. “I have never spoken the story out loud.”

“It’s just us,” Azura soothes, squeezing my hand. Her warmth relaxes me enough that my mind calms.

“We won’t tell a soul,” Belle says with a nod.

I let out a shaky breath. *This is it.*

“When I was seven, I got lost in the woods that border the Mystic Woodlands.” Azura squeezes my hand before pulling it away. I frown at that, my jitters returning. “It was silly, really. I went for a ride with my brother, and he raced off ahead of me, leaving me behind as we were

making our way back to the castle. Then I heard a soft and beautiful voice off in the distance. Curious, I followed the sound and quickly became lost. I turned around, trying to retrace my path, but my horse spooked and threw me. He ran off before I was able to stand, leaving me alone in the woods.”

I pause and take a deep breath, the memory of the fear still vivid. Frost clouds on my fingernails, and slowly travels up my arms.

“I stayed in the same spot for a long time, but the sun was setting. I wandered off, yelling for anyone to find me, but no one came. Night fell, and the trees came alive. Vines and branches reached for me like arms, and glowing eyes glared at me from the deepest shadows. I was horrified. It frightened me so much that I crawled into the hollow of a tree. The voices that night sang to me. They tried to lure me from my hiding spot, threatening to feast on my heart until my blood went dry.”

I look between Azura and Belle, wondering if I should continue. The next part seems like something out of a fairytale. But having started, I realize I want them to know the whole story. I want them to know me.

I gather my courage and say, “I huddled there, cold and terrified as the shadows crept closer. My heart nearly stopped as four wolves slunk out of the dark, three foxes darting past them. I flinched as the small animals crawled over me. But they quickly settled close, providing warmth. The wolves took up sentinel positions around the tree while the foxes scouted. It was then I realized they weren’t there to hurt me. They stood as my guards. Deer, squirrels, and birds brought me food. I was like that for three days until my family found me. Since then... well, I guess that is when the sensation of someone watching me started.”

Azura curses under her breath. “No wonder.... You’re fairy touched.”

“Fairy touched?” I blink.

Belle nods. “Interesting observation.”

Azura looks out into the woods again. “You went to their home and came back. That leaves a mark on you.”

“Is that bad?” I ask, gulping. Though I already know the answer. Azura wouldn’t have cursed when she said the words if it were good.

Fairy touched. Now that the words have been spoken, I remember my mother speaking of this once I returned home. She said that the evils of the forest had marked my soul as theirs, and they would try to take me back.

Azura reaches out, and I place my hand in hers. She flips it over, observing my palm. "You can't go into the woods alone."

I tense. "Why?"

"They are trying to take you back," she says, confirming what my mother said so long ago. "That's why you feel like you are being watched. Why the trees are moving closer."

"Fuck," Belle hisses.

I close my hand in hers. "But... I like the forest."

"Snow," Azura says, her hand gripping mine tighter.

"I just... I can't," I whisper.

Don't leave us, Snow. You must return. You must come back.

I need to go back.

"If they take you, you'll never come back," Azura says with a snap of her teeth.

I flinch, pulling my hand away from Azura. She is so angry. So... determined about this. She doesn't want me to get hurt, but how can I go without being in the woods? They are my escape from reality.

"Just promise not to go into the woods without us," Belle says.

I look down at my hands. "I promise."

"Snow," Azura says.

I look up at her as tears fill my eyes. "I. Promise."

With a sigh, Azura stands and walks back to the balcony.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

AZURA



They're even closer.

The feeling of being watched has intensified to the point I can barely pull my gaze away from the tree line. If I look away for a moment, the trees push closer. Yet no trace of their forward march is marked.

Fairy touched!

The Vessel for the Ice Elemental is fairy touched. If the fae get their hands on a Vessel, it will be a disaster. The limited interaction I've had with the fae has proven it is best to stay the fuck away from them. Too easily, humans slip into their clutches and never return. The Faerie King claimed to have come from another world, where fae lived without humans, though they were divided into light and dark by a magical barrier. It is unknown what happens to the humans they take. If they were just in another realm, we could reach them, but they simply vanish when they are fairy touched, leaving no trace.

Snow is fairy touched.

The fae are trying to reclaim her, but *she is mine*. I can hear Belle and Snow talking to each other behind me. For the moment, she is safe, but there is something about the trees. If I weren't already in hiding, I would've stormed out and demanded answers, but I can't risk it. I can't risk *her*. If I reveal myself, not only will I be placing myself in danger, I won't be able to remain at Snow's side, watching over her.

"Azura?" Belle calls.

"Hm?" I answer without looking back. I can't take my eyes off the trees. What if they take Snow when I am not watching?

“Eat,” she says, and I can hear her pushing the plate on the table toward me as if to coax me back.

“It’s fine.”

“Please, Azura,” Snow pleads, sadness and concern filling her voice.

I close my eyes for a moment, hating that she has such control over me. The sound of her distress sends an ache through my body. A simple entreaty from her makes me want to tear down the world. I sigh and walk over, taking a bite of my food. “Satisfied?”

Belle smiles at me, and Snow nods, even though her eyes are still full of worry. “Sit.”

I grind my teeth. “I don’t take orders well.”

Or at all.

Snow gazes up at me, unafraid of my irritation, her icy eyes huge in her face. “Please, Azura”

She knows all the ways to crumble my resistance. I lean forward and brush the curve of her cheek with my thumb before sitting. “That’s a dirty tactic, my dear Snow.”

My fingers tingle from that brief contact with her cold skin.

Belle snickers. “She’s learning well.”

Snow’s eyes fill with tears. “I’m worried. That is all.”

It almost makes it worse that she’s not doing this on purpose, and she genuinely *cares*. She lacks any kind of artifice. When she begs for me to eat, it’s because she’s actually concerned for my well-being. She’s not trying to prove anything or manipulate me.

I poke at my food, moving it around my plate, “Worried?”

Snow wrings her hands together. “You weren’t eating, and you seem so distracted and far away.”

I force the fork to my mouth as she watches, hoping to soothe some of her concern. I swallow and reassure her, “I’m fine.”

Snow watches me eat, making sure I swallow every bite. Her eyes are huge, and the icy lock she has on me ensures I finish my meal.

I hold my hand out to her. “I promise.”

Snow softens, taking my hand, holding it in hers as she resumes eating her own food, satisfied that I’m not about to starve. “I’m excited to see what you are both doing for the showcase tomorrow.”

She threads her fingers through mine, making me shiver. Not one part of it has to do with the chill from her hand.

I squeeze her hand. "Oh?"

Snow giggles, nodding. "Yes, I have been waiting all week."

Her giggle reassures me, even if her eyes are still sad. I catch her glancing at me repeatedly, worry making her brow furrow. She sounds genuinely excited to see these women parade themselves around for her father. She seems to view this as a casual event with her friends, not women trying to become the next queen.

Belle smirks, finishing her food. "We should celebrate tomorrow."

"Celebrate?" I ask, my hand still entwined with Snow's. I need to pull away and start putting up those walls again, but I don't move.

Belle's gaze catches on our hands. "To this new friendship and how successful our showcase will be. It will be a girls' night. I've never had one of those before."

I've never even heard of one of those. The only girls' nights I've had ended in me fucking someone. I slip into Belle's mind again, mentally fortifying the warped memory I'd planted there. I stop myself from sighing in annoyance. She's scratched the mental wall again.

I only need to keep up the altered memory until I'm the queen.

Snow's eyes light up, some of the shadows receding. "Girls' night?"

Belle claps her hands and stands. "Perfect! After dinner we shall all get together—"

Snow stands and lets go of my hand, which drops uselessly into my lap. "My room! It is the biggest." Snow giggles. "Oh, I should start preparing!"

My finger trails along the inside of my palm, feeling the slight chill leftover from Snow's touch. "Yes, preparing..."

I focus on the hand that was just in mine, my brows furrowing. Why isn't she holding my hand anymore?

Snow kisses Belle's cheek and then mine, but my gaze returns to the forest, distantly hearing her next words.

I let my guard down, and the trees are moving again.

"I shall prepare now! I will see you both at breakfast!" The door opens and closes as they both go, leaving me to watch the forest that continues to creep ever forward.

The trees want my Snow. My happiness.

My eyes narrow on them, and I can practically hear them whispering. *Liar. Murderer. Betrayer.* No one will take this moment of happiness from me. I will hold on to it as long as I can. Once she knows the truth and everything changes, she'll never hold my hand so trustingly again. She won't be able to even look at me.

It's time to get back to my true nature. If I want to survive, I have no choice.

I need to stop pretending to be someone kind and gentle, someone *good*. If the fae want a fight, they are going to regret it. They have no idea who they've challenged.

The wicked bitch is here to stay.

I snarl and drag the trunk from under my bed, flipping up the lock. The illusion that keeps my box invisible breaks when I move it. I'll strengthen the wards on this castle, keeping the trees from coming closer and watching me. They'll never get my Snow. After gathering a golden bowl, an athame, and the heart of a newborn griffin, I start to chant.

I'll keep these fucking fairies out. I'll keep Snow safe.

The chant echoes around the room, and I can feel the dark magic leeching from me, taking more than I want, but I don't stop. I need to protect her and this little piece of innocence that still exists. Somehow Snow hasn't yet been spoiled. I barely manage to finish the spell and struggle to put my tools away, my energy depleted. I try to stand, but the room spins, and I hear something fall.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

SNOW



The next morning comes quickly, and I skip to Azura's room. The showcase is today, and then the girls' night with Azura and Belle. Excitement bubbles inside me, creating tiny butterflies. I have heard rumors that the maids and commoners have nights like this with their friends. They gossip for hours, play strange games, and tell secrets. Things that friends do. My lips curve in a small smile. I have that. Belle and Azura are my friends.

I stop in front of Azura's door, knocking in a playful rhythm.

"Azuurraaaa, breakfast time!" I sing.

I frown when I get no answer. That is odd. Azura is usually up by now. She is an early riser compared to Belle and me.

"Azura?" I call out, knocking again.

There is still no answer, and something doesn't feel right. Before I have time to consider it, my hand is on the doorknob, and I am pushing the door open.

"Azura, I know you're—" My words end on a gasp when I notice Azura's pale body lying on the floor. I run to her and collapse to my knees beside her. My heart pounds as I gently shake her. "Azura! Azura!"

She groans and tries to turn toward my voice, but she is obviously weak. My mind crowds with panicked thoughts and questions. *What happened? Is she hurt?* I can't stand to look at her in this state, and I truly don't know how to help her. My magic doesn't heal. At least I have never tested it out, and I won't do so now. I can't risk making her condition worse with my abilities. I can't risk turning her into ice. My stomach churns with anxiety.

Kiss her.

The thought is almost a compulsion, and I am unable to stop myself from leaning down to brush a soft kiss against her pale pink lips. They are so warm, smoother than anything I have ever touched. Her mouth is like

sweet velvet, and I can't get enough. I can only hope the coldness of my lips will snap her out of her dream state.

Suddenly, her lips part and a moan escapes her. I gasp from her heat, my tongue slipping into her open mouth. She tastes of berries, and my core goes molten with desire, my wildest fantasies coming to life. I want to rip her dress down the center and kneed her perfect breasts. Am I really having this moment with her?

I pull her closer to me as I lick the roof of her mouth. Our tongues dance, exploring, teasing, demanding, and giving. She places her hand on the back of my neck, pulling me closer. I moan into her mouth, allowing her to taste my excitement as I cup her lush breasts. They are a perfect size, fitting nicely into my palms. I can feel her heart pounding, and her nipples tighten as I tease my thumbs over them. A shiver goes through me, and I ache with the need to roll them between my fingers, squeezing her breasts until they flush beneath my touch. I want to kiss and nip, rolling my tongue over the buds until I feel her core pulsate against my thigh. She is going to have me melting into a puddle.

"You taste so sweet," Azura growls into my mouth.

My thighs slide together, slick with moisture. The ache at my core is overwhelming, and I need her touch on me to ease it. I want to grind myself against her thigh... no, her mouth.

"I-I do?" I ask against her lips.

"Snow," Azura says, slowly opening her eyes. My stomach drops. No. No, no, no, no. I made a mistake. I shouldn't have kissed her. Why did I kiss her? She is going to hate me. I took advantage of her while she was sleeping. I am terrible, horrible...

"I-I was worried." I gulp. "You weren't waking up, and I... I just thought if I kissed you, you'd wake up. It is silly, I know."

Azura smiles softly, touching my cheek. "Oh?"

Her smile calms me, melting the ice in my veins. "Are you all right?"

"Fine," she says, stroking my cheek. "Are you all right?"

"I am now that you're awake." I nod, smiling softly at her.

She leans up, kissing me again. "Your hand is wandering, dear Snow."

My eyes widen. *She kissed me. She...* I look down at my hand still on her breast, my face heating with shame. I pull it away quickly.

"S-Sorry."

Azura takes my hand and places it back on her breast. She wants this? She wants my hand on her beautiful, luscious breasts? I can't help but gently squeeze. She is soft but firm. There is so much of her body I want to explore. Would it be terrible to stick my face between them and rub them against my cheeks? My eyes widen, and I pull my hands away.

"Sorry, I just... I could... not..." I stutter.

"Why are you apologizing?" she whispers.

"My thoughts..." I shake my head. "They've been inappropriate, and I am helpless against them."

I want to feel more of them.

"You can feel them again," Azura says, biting her lower lip. And just like that, my prayers have been answered.

"R-Really?" I ask her.

"Touch me, Snow," she says, her eyes warm with the same hunger tearing at me. I place my hands gently on her breasts, squeezing.

"Like this?" I ask.

She moans, arching her back. "Yes."

I shiver, continuing to knead the lush flesh. I can't get enough of this. What would it be like to touch Azura's bare skin? What would it be like to run my hands down her torso? I want to know. Azura warms my cold heart when our lips meet, her kiss sending shivers down my spine. Her touch alone shoots pleasure through my body, and I need more.

"Can we kiss again?" I whisper.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

AZURA



Snow tastes like chilled apples on a hot day in summer. The feeling of her mouth on mine is better than I imagined. Her hand trails over my heated skin, making it come alive in response. I knew she wanted me. She had given herself away with her lingering gazes and jealousy, but I didn't think she wanted me as much as I wanted her. Yet I can taste the yearning in her kiss, the longing.

I pull her mouth back down to mine, pressing my lips hard against hers, savoring her taste. I fit my body against hers as if I could warm her with just my touch.

Snow gasps, allowing me to thrust my tongue inside her mouth. She thumbs my nipple over my dress, her hips shifting restlessly against me. My curious, innocent princess. She is begging to be pleased. Has she imagined this as much as I?

I shift closer to her and roll, shifting her to her back. Our tongues clash, and our teeth click with urgency. Her free hand goes to my other breast, and she squeezes. I smother a laugh. Snow might be obsessed with my breasts. It is an obsession I'm willing to oblige.

I sit up and straddle her, my voice a low purr. "Snow?"

Her glacial eyes are warm with lust, her cheeks flushed. "Y-Yes?"

I twine my fingers with hers, pinning her hands to the floor above her head. I kiss her again, pressing our bodies close, eager to touch and taste more of her.

Will I ever get enough?

The feel of her breasts rubbing against mine is sweet agony. I want to touch them, suck on them, bury my face into her pussy and never come up again.

Snow arches her back, mewling against my lips, “Azura...”

I dip my head to taste her neck, but a knock on the door stops me. I roll off Snow and get to my feet, reaching down to help her up before I call out, “Yes?”

Fuck, what was I thinking? I can’t give in to temptation with Snow. She is not the type to take pleasure where she finds it and moves on. She’s too pure, too gentle. *Too good for me.* The knock came at the perfect time. I should let her go. I shouldn’t touch her again.

“Azura!” Belle calls from the other side of the door. “I can’t find Snow anywhere. We were going to walk down to the event together.”

Snow blushes, fixing her dress. Her eyes are still heated, and I can feel them on the curve of my neck. I shiver and lick my lips, savoring the lingering taste of her.

“She’s in here. We will meet you down there,” I call out, fighting to keep the lust from my voice.

Belle calls out again, “Alright then! I’ll meet with Lady Lock.” I can hear the smirk in her voice.

I look at Snow. “Are you all right?”

She’s trembling. “I am. I’m sorry for touching you.”

I frown. “Sorry? Don’t ever be sorry for touching me.” Already, I want more of her cold hands on my heated skin.

She shakes her head. “I... I just... I shouldn’t.”

I step closer, taking her hands in mine. “How did it feel? Touching me? Kissing me?”

Say you liked it, Snow, and I’ll give you more. I’ll give you everything if you ask.

So quickly I forget my resolve to stay away. Snow’s thumb is rubbing along my hand, destroying any resistance.

Her cheeks turn dark shades of red as she whispers shakily, “Good. Really, really good. Does that make me terrible?”

I moan softly at her words and any resistance I had to her crumbles. I could make her feel *so good*. “We should talk after.”

I'm going to fuck you so thoroughly you won't be able to breathe without thinking about me.

Snow nods and kisses me softly before saying, "Talk like that?"

I brush my fingers against her breast in a featherlight caress and growl deeply, "Yes."

She shivers, pressing closer to kiss me again. I bite her bottom lip, drunk on the taste of her. "We should go downstairs."

She shifts from foot to foot. "I'm... um..." She shifts, pressing her thighs together. "I think it's going to be hard to walk."

I keep forgetting how perfectly innocent she is. I move to the door and lock it, the sound echoing in the room. "Let me take care of my princess," I say, walking toward her, forcing her to retreat until her ass meets the bed.

She falls back, going to her elbows. Those glacial eyes lock on me. "Won't they l-look for us?"

I wish I had more time to tease and torture her, but I'll make do. I lift the edge of her dress up, slipping my head under the skirt. "It will be fast, princess."

My lips graze the inside of her thigh, wondering if a part of her hoped this would happen since she's bare beneath her skirts. Her cunt glistens, inviting me to touch and taste. I barely take the time to kiss and reassure her before falling on her like a starved animal.

She tastes even better than I dreamed. I could drink this pussy down for years, decades. My tongue flicks against her swollen clit, smirking at how wet she is from just our kisses. Poor little princess needs to be fucked, and fucked hard. If we had time, I'd tease her closer and closer to release. I would take her to the edge again and again until she begged to come, and her body was on the verge of breaking from denied release.

I wrap my lips around her clit and suck, pressing one finger inside her, rubbing, then thrusting. She gasps and squirms. "Sweet mother of I—"

Her words cut off into a moan, and I continue licking and sucking, feeling her tighten on my fingers. Has my poor princess never touched herself? Has she ever come?

I imagine her riding my lap as I use a toy on her. On her hands and knees, on her back, in the open air. Fuck, is there any place or any way, I don't want to fuck her?

"Fuck," I moan, drinking her down.

She squirms faster, moaning louder. "What are you doing?"

I take a long lick of her again. "Tasting you."

She moans again. "How do I taste?"

I suck her clit into my mouth and add a second finger, stretching her. "Sweet as an apple."

Addictive.

Snow's thighs tremble around my ears. "I... Azura... I feel... strange."

I smirk, licking and thrusting my fingers at the same time. "Let it happen, princess, cover your mouth."

I can feel her tighten, and I don't want this to end, my tongue moving frantically, sucking and licking, wringing the orgasm from her. When she arches and shakes, I drink her down and lick her clean before pulling out from under her dress. My eyes roll back in pleasure, and my belly tightens as I suck my fingers, making sure to savor every drop. "Better, princess?"

Snow glances up at me, her eyes glazed. "Y-Yes... much."

I smirk, holding my hand out to her. "We should head downstairs."

She takes my hand, and I pull her to her feet, fixing her dress. "Yes, downstairs," she says, her voice filled with stunned wonder.

I laugh, keeping her hand in mine as we walk to the door.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

SNOW



Pure bliss.

I have never felt anything like this. The explosion of pleasure brought stars to my eyes and made my body quiver. I don't even know how I have the strength to stand right now. I am still trembling from the feel of Azura's perfect lips against me. Perhaps my strength comes from Azura's hand in mine. Her warmth is able to keep me in the present rather than the past when her mouth melded to my mound. I shiver at the thought.

There is no coldness. No voices. Just peace.

Azura and I make our way downstairs to the ballroom. Inside, everything is set up for the show. There is a small wooden stage at the front of the room. Chairs and round tables clutter the space, and some of the princesses are already preparing for their performance. I spot Belle and Lady Lock sitting at one of the tables together. Lady Lock's face is paler than usual, her hands fiddling with some yarn. Belle's face is calm, though her eyes are scanning the room. I wonder what she is looking for?

Lady Lock's knee starts to shake as we approach, but she offers us a bright smile. Belle waves before pulling out her book and flipping through the pages.

"Are you guys excited?" I ask.

"Nervous. I feel like I'm about to vomit." Lady Lock gulps.

Belle pats the woman's hand, her focus still on her book. "You'll be amazing. Much better than..." Belle trails off and waves her hand toward Princess Petunia as she throws her head back and emits a loud screeching sound that echoes through the room. So she is going to be... singing? I hate being rude, but I have to cover my ears. She sounds like a dying seagull.

My attention moves back to Lady Lock, who is turning a bit green. I take her hands in mine and rub my thumbs over the backs. I summon my

ice, cooling my touch. The effect is meant to soothe, and it looks like it is working.

“Breathe with me,” I whisper.

Lady Lock nods, taking deep breaths. I smile at her, and she returns a weak grimace.

“We shall now begin the showcase,” my brother announces from the stage. When did he arrive?

Eric stands beside our father, his eyes looking over the women gathered. He takes his time, looking at each one. I assume he is testing to see if they will melt beneath his gaze. I can hear the women at the nearest table sigh, and I shake my head. My brother did have a point. He is the test to see if these women will be loyal to our father.

Princess Petunia is up first, gracing us with her seagull-like voice. I watch my father from the corner of my eye, and even he can't help but wince. She will be going home tonight, which isn't much of a loss. I'd overheard her talking about Azura in a nasty tone. She called her a manipulative bitch. It made my blood boil, and I almost froze her into an ice sculpture.

Once she finishes, two other princesses go. The first woman does a dance. She is beauty and grace personified, and even I am entranced. The latter plays the piano, the music so long and somber that Belle nearly falls asleep. I giggle softly at her, and she hits my shoulder.

“Lady Lock,” Eric announces.

I lean over, kissing Lock's cheek. “You can do this.”

Lock nods anxiously before standing and making her way to the stage. She takes her seat and arranges her knitting.

“There was once a little girl made of ice,” Lock begins, her needles flashing as she starts to knit. “She was different from the others and not just because of her abilities. This girl was kind and giving. Many would call her naïve, but she was more than that. Everyone she talked to felt the touch of her goodness, spreading light and happiness to all.”

Lady Lock's hands moved as if without thought, the needles clicking softly in the quiet of the room as she held all within her thrall.

“One day, she met someone who was the complete opposite of her, a being crowded with hate and emptiness. Their souls called to one another, and their personalities shifted to complement the other. But something

stood in their way, an evil unknown to both of them. Will they be able to stop this evil before it consumes them? Only time will tell.”

Lady Lock flips the small blanket she’d created. She had done it with a speed I didn’t know was possible. The blanket depicts two women in silhouette, holding hands as they look at the setting sun. It is breathtaking, and I can hardly look away from it. Lady Lock is truly talented.

Everyone claps for her as she stands. Her face flushes red as she scurries from the stage and back to her seat. I smile at her, taking her hand as Azura makes her way to the stage. She stops next to a bowl of shiny red apples and picks up a bow and quiver of arrows. She tosses each apple but one into the air, shooting her arrow and hitting them all in one go, pinning them against a target set up against the wall. My jaw drops in awe, and I shift in my seat, arousal rippling through me.

Azura turns to look at us, bowing before grabbing the last apple from the bowl and stepping off the stage. My eyes track her, observing the blush above her breasts. The events of this morning play through my mind, and I don’t fight the memories. I hunger to feel her tongue against my clit again. Remembering how she ran it in lazy circles around the sensitive bundle of nerves until she brought me to climax makes my body heat in anticipation. It was pure bliss, and I need more.

Belle steps onto the stage, catching my attention. She tells her story, her voice wrapping each of us in her spell, though not everyone is watching. I can’t take my eyes off Azura as she weaves through the tables. She winks at my father and gives him the last apple before sitting beside me. My heart twists in my chest. *I want that apple.*

I focus back on Belle but don’t notice when she is done until everyone starts clapping. I join in, but I wish Azura would give me the look she gave my father. Even though my stomach twists with jealousy, I crave her. As the show ends, my father stands to address everyone.

“Thank you for sharing your talents with us. It was extremely enjoyable to watch, and it helps me get to know you all just a little better,” he says, his voice filled with warmth. “Tonight, a few of you lovely ladies will be sent back to your homes. It was a pleasure to meet you, and I hope you are able to find love with others. For the rest of you, I will be back in a week. When I am, I will arrange dates with each of you. I am truly excited to get

to know you all more. It is now time for me to depart. I will see you ladies soon.”

I smile sadly as I rise and hurry to him. He wraps his arms around me in a tight hug.

“Be safe, Papa,” I whisper.

“I will,” he says, pressing a kiss to my head before releasing me. I watch as he turns and leaves.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

AZURA



There's a palpable shift in the room after the king leaves. It is as if everything was barely held in check by his presence, and the moment he's gone, all propriety is lost. I lick my lips absently, savoring the taste of frosted apples, as I watch the post-show. The women focus on Eric, openly assessing him like predators preparing to attack. I can't help but roll my eyes. They are so transparent, and they're meant to be competing for his *father*, not him.

How does no one else see how empty he is? He is a storm with skin, a smile without a soul, yet these women hope to draw his attention. To his credit, though his gaze moves over them slowly and an arrogant smirk plays with his lips, his eyes don't change. He's feigning interest, going through the motions.

Eric ignores the fawning women and saunters over to Snow, making my teeth grind. His scent makes my skin itch as if saltwater has dried on it. I fight to keep myself from scratching at my arms, refusing to let him know he affects me.

"What are we going to do? Throw a ball?" He says it so deliberately loud that the other women gasp. Eric's famous for his illicit balls in the coastal palace. Invitations to one are coveted, and it is whispered that the activities are clothing optional.

Snow looks up at him, glacial eyes clashing against the riotous sea. "Eric!"

As he throws his arm across her shoulders, their similarities are even more apparent. When he is close to Snow, Eric's eyes seem slightly less

vacant, his smile less forced. Snow's presence affects him as it does me, and for a moment, I forget all the reasons I hate that he is here.

Eric snorts. "I'm joking."

My mind is already calculating. If the rumors are correct, one of Eric's get-togethers might allow me the opportunity to force out more of my remaining competition. There is the added benefit that I doubt anyone would notice if I cornered the princess in a dark alcove and had my way with her. I lick my lips again, savoring the thought.

Not important right now.

"Why not, Snow?" I ask, my voice soothing and seductive. It is the same tone I used on her earlier, the one that made her melt for me.

Snow flushes in response and looks at me. She blinks repeatedly and shifts in her seat. "Why n-not, what?"

Belle glides to Eric's other side. "Throw a ball?"

Snow chews her lip, and I slide my hand into hers, squeezing reassuringly. She glances at the three of us, all of us waiting for her response. "My father won't be here."

I gesture to Eric. "But the vagrant will be."

Eric makes a face at my name for him, even as Snow frowns. "So? I don't understand."

Poor thing, she doesn't want to let us down.

I smile softly at her, softer than I should, and purr, "Don't you want to have some fun?"

Snow nods, her glacial eyes warming. I can practically read her thoughts, even as they remain hidden behind that wall of ice in her mind. She's imagining slipping away with me during the ball while everyone's distracted. She wants more of earlier, and so do I.

I release her hand and fix the lines of my dress. "Well, let's throw a ball. I'm sure all the women could use a fun little distraction from Eric's continued presence."

Belle covers a giggle behind her hand, and Eric's eyes lock on mine, a barely leashed storm brewing in their depths. Uh-oh, it looks like someone doesn't have full control of their powers yet. What a shame. It would be absolutely terrible if he lost control and injured those he loved, wouldn't it? Then, I recoil at the thought because that includes Snow.

A pounding begins in my head. What is wrong with me? Why can't I shake this? She's a pawn! She is a necessary sacrifice if I am to become the queen I was born to be. Yet, I'm licking my lips for more of her taste. My gut twists in horror at the idea of her shedding a single tear because of me. I need to distance myself from her. What happened this morning cannot happen again.

What in the name of dark magic was I thinking? I seduced the one person, besides that loathsome prince, whose memories I can't touch. If I breach the icy wall in her head, she could become unresponsive, lose all memories, and even... die. The pounding in my head increases, the pain settling behind my eyes and causing my vision to vibrate.

"Alright, let's do it," Snow says, and it's the only thing that I can hear at the moment. The sound of her voice cuts through the agony in my head.

I need distance from Snow White. She could ruin everything. She *is* ruining everything. My craving for her purity and innocence is altering my focus, and my carefully laid plans are disappearing before my eyes. I nod, touching my head. "Please, excuse me."

I can't even look at her as I leave the room, knowing she's going to be wearing an expression that will cut me off at the knees. Her bright icy eyes will be wide, full of unshed tears. This will hurt her. I am pushing her away after I tasted her for the first time. She awoke me with a kiss, and she'll blame herself. And she'll be right. It is because of her. It's because she awakens feelings in a heart that turned black long ago. How she does that, I'll never understand. She shouldn't be affecting me. *I cannot let her affect me.*

I lick my lips again.

CHAPTER THIRTY

SNOW



As soon as Azura walks away, the empty sensation in my chest seems to grow. There is something wrong, but I am not sure what. One moment her eyes were devouring me. The next, she was in pain and had put distance between us.

It is because she doesn't want you. Who would? Naïve little Snow.

I press my lips together, ignoring the voices that have returned full force.

After our time together this morning, I thought things would change. But every time Azura leaves me, my heart aches, and I feel adrift. The sensation doesn't ease until I can see her and smell her, feel her hand brush against mine.

Belle shrugs and says, "Let us go eat something."

"Mind if I join?" Eric smirks at her.

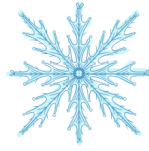
Belle scrunches her nose at him. "Ew, no."

I laugh as Belle links her arm with mine. Her touch is comforting, but not the same. It is nothing I crave compared to Azura's. Belle's heat doesn't warm me like Azura's. This obsession with Azura is unhealthy, yet when I try to think of something else, all I can see is her blonde hair draped over my pillow. I close my eyes, letting out a shaky breath before looking over my shoulder at the stairs. Azura is nowhere to be seen. I feel my chest tighten and my smile fade.

"Don't worry about her. She just needs some time to herself. You know Azura. We will see her for our girls' night."

"Yeah," I mumble, "we will."

My mind doesn't want to focus on the now. I try to think of the food that awaits me, but my thoughts keep circling back to this morning when Azura's mouth was buried between my thighs, and she was milking pleasure from me.



The rest of the day goes by slowly, lunch, followed by my duties, followed by dinner. Usually, I would find little moments of joy in the routine, but Azura isn't there for any of it, which makes the time drag and everything feel dull. As the day ends and I prepare for our girls' night, I am nearly vibrating with excitement. I slip on my nightgown, spinning in a circle before preparing my room. I gather more pillows than we need, toss them on the bed, and arrange the snacks I had brought up.

I am just lighting the candles when there is a knock on the door. I frown, placing a hand on my stomach as my heart drops. This doesn't feel right. Why doesn't this feel right?

Because everyone is starting to leave you.

I open the door to one of Azura's maids. Her eyes are glazed, and it feels like she is looking past me. I raise my hand to wave it in front of her, but I stop as she holds out a letter.

"From Lady Azura," she says, her voice flat.

"Thank you..."

She doesn't let me finish as she turns on her heel and walks toward Azura's room. I watch her go, my brow furrowing. It is probably nothing. She is most likely just tired from the travel and all the excitement. I should ask Father to arrange a day of rest for the staff.

I close the door, my steps slow as I make my way to the bed and plop down. I unfold the note, my eyes skimming over Azura's perfect handwriting.

I'm feeling under the weather, dear one.

A.

For a moment, I sit there in shock before tears roll down my face. The only thing that helped me get through the day was knowing that I would be spending the night with Belle and Azura.

See? They are all going to leave you.

Disappointment twists my insides, and I decide that for once, I can't let it go.

No. She is just not feeling herself. I need to check on her.

I grab my robe, wrapping it tightly around my body as I walk down the hallway to her room and knock. The door opens, and Azura pokes her head out.

"Snow? Did you not get my note?" she asks, tilting her head.

I nod. "I did, but I was worried. May I come in?"

She opens the door and touches her forehead. "Just a headache."

"I'll have someone make you some soup," I say as I step into her room.

"I'll be fine, Snow. It's just a little headache," Azura repeats.

"You know what cures headaches?" Belle says from behind me, causing me to jump.

"Gosh, Belle! You scared me!" I gasp, placing a hand on my chest.

Belle wanders in, snorting at me. Her body sways from side to side and I can't help but if she is drunk.

"Ow. Please." Azura groans, touching her head.

"Sorry," Belle whispers, before flopping back onto Azura's bed.

I groan. "I'm s-sorry, Azura. We will go."

"Aren't we supposed to have a girls' night?" Belle asks.

"We can when she is feeling better," I respond.

If she even wants to see you again.

Azura groans again. "You can stay if you're quiet."

Belle's eyes light up, and she pats a spot for me on the bed.

"Are you sure?" I ask Azura.

She nods, moving to lie back on her bed and covering her eyes with a black towel. "It's fine."

"Is there nothing that will help?" Belle asks.

"No," Azura says. I take her hand in mine, using my thumbs to massage the middle of her palms. When I was a girl, my mother would often massage my hands to help take the pain from the elemental magic growing in my body. On some occasions, my hands would almost freeze from the strength of the ice elemental.

Azura winces but doesn't pull away. "I often get them. They can be debilitating," she says, trailing her fingers along my hand. "That feels good."

“Hm,” Belle hums, looking between us. “Well, you want to know how I calm my headaches?”

Azura snorts as I move to her next palm, my hands cooling. “I don’t think I even want to know what you use, Belle.”

Belle laughs. “I was going to say soup... and a sturdy pillow.”

“I don’t get it,” I say with a frown. Belle only chuckles in response.

“Don’t let me put a damper on girls’ night,” Azura says on a purr of contentment as I continue to massage her hand.

“I don’t mind it. Really,” I say, shaking my head.

Belle nods. “Besides, we should celebrate, Azura. We were chosen to stay. Lady Lock was, too. If you are curious.”

Azura smirks. “Not surprising.”

I make Azura sit up, sliding behind her as I move my hands to her shoulders and dig into them, kneading at the knots making her muscles so tight. I have never felt so much tension before.

How much has she had to carry on her shoulders? For how long?

Belle shrugs. “You missed some of the tearful exits, too.”

Azura moans softly, resting her head on my shoulder. “Who?”

“Princess Tabitha. Lady Celina,” Belle says, tilting her head as she watches us. “Oh, and Princess Petunia.”

Being this close to Azura has my heart pounding. She smells like orchids and all things wicked. When I close my eyes, I picture us naked and surrounded by those flowers. Goodness me, I can’t start thinking about this now.

“No surprises there,” Azura says.

“They were the worst, honestly.” Belle nods.

On occasion, I’d heard those women trashing Belle’s name due to her origins. She isn’t a princess or a lady, yet somehow, she ended up here. I don’t care about that. I am glad she is here, but to the other princesses, it would be considered improper, almost scandalous, for a woman of Belle’s status to be accepted as queen.

My hand trails down Azura’s back to her hips. She responds by arching into my touch, increasing the ache between my thighs.

“Truly, I have a feeling it might be down to Lock and us,” Azura says.

“Uh-huh.” Belle raises a brow.

“You doubt me?” Azura smirks.

“You? Never.” Belle shakes her head just as my hands grip Azura’s hips and squeeze. She leans back into me, and I have to restrain myself from kissing her soft neck.

“But?” Azura asks.

“There is no but, Azura,” Belle says. “I know you are capable.”

“Oh?” Azura lowers the cloth from her eyes.

Belle shrugs. “I feel like when you want something. You get it. No?”

I chew my lip, fiddling with Azura’s ties. Belle’s words are going through my mind, but I am not processing them. Not when I can feel the heat from Azura’s body radiating against mine. What wouldn’t I do to tug her ties undone and strip her bare?

“I do,” Azura says.

“How’s that headache now?” Belle asks, tilting her head.

“I have a feeling it might disappear completely if you found a convenient excuse to depart.”

Belle pouts. “You are no fun, but fine.”

She slips from the bed, which brings my attention back to her fully. I had been lost in thoughts of Azura’s lush body.

“Where are you going?” I ask.

“A stroll.” Belle shrugs.

“Enjoy your stroll. Watch out for beasties,” Azura says.

“Oh, you know me. I’ll just...” Belle waves her hand in the air before walking out of the room.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

AZURA



Snow's hands are still tangled in my dress ties, the material sliding down my shoulders. I'm tempted to purr as my body relaxes. But with her touch came the memory of her taste, and a blinding need took hold of me. "Was it something I said?" Snow asks, frowning after Belle.

I pull away from her hands, moving to lie down on the bed. My body is hot with need, and I purr, "Something you said?"

She nods, looking down at me, her eyes heated. "Why did she have to go?"

Does she know her eyes are trailing down my body as she asks? Her pink tongue darts out of her mouth, licking her lips. I follow the movement with my gaze. Is she imagining tasting me?

I laugh softly at her question, stretching slightly. "Sometimes, I forget how very innocent you are, my princess. Belle noticed your wandering hands."

As did I.

I could still feel her cool touch along my shoulders and back. It both soothes and inflames me, and I want them on my bare skin. I want her cold hands to brand my skin, so everyone knows I'm hers and that she's *mine*.

Her cheeks burn brightly, her breath making her breasts shake as they become shallow. "I didn't mean... Oh my goodness, I should apologize. I didn't..."

I toss the cloth away, my headache completely forgotten. My hands trail down my neck and over my chest, drawing her eyes. "You didn't?" My hands tug on my ties, and the dress sags noticeably.

Snow's eyes lock on my exposed skin, and she gulps. "I... I forgot what I was going to say."

I laugh, rolling onto my front and resting my face against my pillow. "You may continue."

Snow leaps at the chance. I feel her unlacing my ties the rest of the way. I want her hands on me, and she seems more than happy to oblige.

"Azura... I can't stop thinking about you."

I haven't stopped thinking about you since you looked up at me so innocently as a rude princess attempted to make you apologize. You should never apologize for anything, Snow.

"Oh?" I purr. "What do you think about me, princess?" I want her to tell me all the ways to make her unravel.

My dress slips down my shoulders, the material parting. Snow's cool fingers graze my heated skin. "I-I want to see your breasts. I want to taste you as you tasted me."

I can barely hold back my moans. Has anyone ever been so innocently alluring before? She is captivating without even trying. Snow doesn't even know the effect her words have on me or anyone else.

This innocent, pure princess will be mine and no one else's.

I wiggle out of my dress and corset but keep my chest pressed to the bed. I know Snow wants to trace her fingers over my breasts. So I'll keep them from her gaze for as long as possible, teasing her with how close they are. "What else?" I ask, knowing there are so many things I could show her.

Tell me your darkest fantasies, princess. Let me make them come to life.

Snow whimpers, her hands tracing the lines of my back. "I want you to teach me everything."

I can't stop the moan this time. "Strip me, Snow, and I'll consider it."

Her hands run down my chemise, her fingers quickly working the ties, leaving my body bare for her inspection. I gesture to the bedside table, keeping my eyes closed. "There's some massage oil in there. Why don't you pour some on me?"

I hear the sounds of silk hitting the ground, and I hope she's stripped. She straddles my back, and I smother my tsk of disappointment at the feel of her chemise. She must have only taken off her robe.

The oil drips onto my warm back, cooling with Snow's touch. The temperature variations are something I never knew I desired.

I moan again. "Explore me, Snow. Nowhere is forbidden to you."

Her hands work my lower back, pressing out the knots. She moves my hair to the side, kissing the side of my neck as if needing the reassurance of my continued presence.

"Good girl," I purr.

Her hands massage deeper, running down my back, gripping my ass. I shiver, spreading my legs slightly for her. She squeezes the curve of my butt before slipping her cool fingers between my thighs.

My hands grip the pillow as I rock against her touch. "Touch me."

Snow giggles softly. "Say please."

My entire body stiffens, and I wrap my legs around her waist. I roll her onto her back, switching our positions in a flash. "What was that?"

Snow gulps, her eyes locked on my breasts. "Oh... I... you have to say please."

I smirk at that, trailing my finger down her cheek. "Me?" I take what I want. No one stops me. *Please* is a word that will never cross my lips.

She nods, shivering. I drag my nail down her cheek, hissing, "I don't beg, princess, I take what I want."

She shrinks back from my touch. "O-Oh."

"Do I frighten you?"

She shakes her head. "N-No."

I drag one nail over the pulse in her neck. "Are you sure, sweet Snow?"

She gulps. "I'm just... I'm n-nervous."

My gut clenches. How could I have forgotten her innocence? I soften, leaning forward to kiss her. "We don't have to." Those words almost kill me to utter.

"I want to," she whispers, heat returning to her eyes.

I roll off her and onto my back, crooking my finger. "Take it slow, princess."

Snow nods, fiddling with the ties of her chemise. Her hands shake, and I cover them. "Snow, look at me."

She locks eyes with me, whispering, "Yes?"

"Slow, princess," I whisper and kiss her again. The silk slides off her body with a single tug of her ties.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

SNOW



This is really happening. Azura and I are alone in her room. She is naked before me, and I will soon be joining her. It is like every wicked dream I've had. Her nipples are the pale pink of carnations. They are tight, jutting forward and begging for me to suck. I want to roll them with my tongue and watch her squirm. Azura has curves in all the right places. Her bum is round and easy to grip, and I want to grab it again, massaging it until it is red and burning.

Her delicate hands push my chemise from my shoulders. My breath is quick, cool, and heavy as her hands slide over my skin. Azura's pale pink lips press softly against mine, making my core pulsate. My eyes become heavy as I pull away from the kiss.

"May I... may I kiss you um..." *Down where I can milk your pleasure for hours.* I can't seem to finish my sentence, afraid if I do, I will wake from this dream.

Azura opens her arms and says, "Come here."

I chew my lip for a moment. I could climb up her body and kiss her for hours or... I lower my lips to her belly, placing hot kisses on her porcelain skin.

"Don't be so nervous," she moans softly. "Your touch is all I need. It makes me drip."

Your words make me drip daily.

I run my tongue from her belly button to her hip, placing another soft kiss against it. Azura arches her back, tunneling her fingers into my dark hair. "Just like that," she moans. I continue my work, kissing down between her thighs. Her legs fall open to me, revealing her perfect pink pussy. It shines for me in the candlelight. Goodness me, it is better than my wildest dreams.

My kisses are light and soft as I trail my lips along the sensitive skin of her inner thigh. I rub my nose against her clit, and she moans softly as I kiss her pussy. Her warmth entrances me, and my kisses become desperate, her taste addicting.

“Yes,” Azura moans, rocking her hips, my nose rubbing against her clit once more. I can’t hold back anymore, and I take a long lick of her, letting out a rough moan. She tastes better than the Golden Oasis. The body of water is rumored to bring bliss and peace to a person’s soul. I don’t think I will ever need to drink that water when I have access to Azura’s perfect taste.

“You like tasting me?” Azura asks, her back arching.

“So fucking m-much.” I nod and bury myself into her pussy, taking slow licks of her as I wrap my arms around her legs.

She moans and sits up on her elbows. “I like watching you lick my pussy, princess.” I moan as her hand grips my hair, and she rocks her hips more vigorously. “Like that. Like that.”

Shivers run down my spine, and I swirl my tongue around her clit, sliding one finger inside her. I press my hips against the bed, needing to relieve the ache inside me. Azura’s thighs tremble as they press against my head. She grinds her pussy against my mouth as I grip her hips, savoring the taste, scent, and feel of her.

Azura’s moans become louder, and I press a second finger inside her. Within seconds, I feel her walls tightening around them, pulsating as she muffles her screams into a pillow. Her entire body shudders as I drink down her orgasm. I don’t know how, but her taste is even sweeter after she comes. It overwhelms me, and I lap up every inch of her skin.

“Fuck, princess.” Azura moans, unlocking her legs from behind my head. She lets them rest beside my body as I slowly pull away, licking my lips, already hungering for more.

“A-Azura?”

Her breath is heavy as she holds her hands out for me. “Come here.”

I crawl up her body and curl into her arms. Everything hits me like a brick. I licked her where it was forbidden. I kissed her until she screamed. Does she hate me? No, she couldn’t hate me. She wanted it as much as I did, but did I do it right?

Azura laughs softly, kissing my forehead. “How did that feel, hm?”

“Good, so good.” I shake slightly, tearing up. “Did I do good? Am I a good girl?”

She lifts my chin, so my eyes connect with hers. “You are a good girl.”

“P-promise?” I ask, my voice quavering.

“Promise,” she says, cupping my cheek. “My very good girl and her wicked tongue.”

I let out a shaky breath before kissing her softly.

“That nervous, princess?” she asks against my lips.

“Yes.” I nod.

“I’m sorry,” she says, pulling me closer to her. She tugs the comforter up, covering both of us. The weight and pressure of the blanket and Azura’s arms calm me, my pounding heart settling.

“Just because I-I was nervous doesn’t mean I d-didn’t like it,” I stutter.

She lifts my chin, smiling at me and twirling a lock of my hair around her finger. “Did you like it?”

“I loved it,” I whispered. Azura rolls me onto my back and kisses along the curve of my breast.

“My turn,” she says with a wicked smirk.

“Please.” I moan softly, my hips already bucking from need. Azura smirks, her tongue swirling over my nipples. She wets them with her mouth and sucks deep, making a popping noise when she releases the sensitive tip. I shiver, my pussy pulsing and my core dripping. Azura gives the same treatment to my other nipple before kissing down my abdomen. Goosebumps rise on my skin, and I arch my back.

“A-Azura...”

“Yes, princess?” she says, tracing her tongue over my hip bones.

“I’m all yours,” I whisper. Our eyes lock on each other as Azura settles between my thighs and laps along my swollen, drenched folds. My breath hitches in my throat.

“So sweet.” She moans.

I squirm on the bed. “More.”

She flicks her tongue over my clit, making me jump. “Delicious.”

I moan, arching my back as she presses two fingers inside my aching core. I feel the pressure building deep inside.

“Oh, my... I... wow.” I gasp as she hits something inside me. Her tongue laps against my clit, and I mew in pleasure.

“Come on my tongue,” she commands. I whimper, gripping the sheets as she continues her conquest of my body. Pleasure rips through me, a shiver of pure ecstasy warming my belly. My moans are loud and throaty as I thrash on the bed. I cease moving when Azura finally releases my clit and kisses my thighs before crawling up my body.

“Still nervous?” she asks.

I shake my head, panting. “No.”

She kisses me softly before laying next to me. “Good girl.”

I shiver, whispering, “Say it again.”

She hugs me tight and says, “Very good girl.”

I smile brightly, pressing my face against her breast. This is what pure bliss and contentment feel like. I am never giving it up.

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

AZURA



I stroked Snow's hair, marveling at the way the tight curls retain their perfect shape even when pulled. The cool touch of Snow's skin beneath the warm blankets sends a hum of deep contentment through my body. My muscles are lax, the tension in my body is draining away, and everything in me relaxes. I'm not someone who basks in the afterglow of sex, but with Snow beside me, all of my carefully laid plans are gone.

Snow hums softly and runs her cool fingers around my nipple, making the bud tighten. I shift under her touch, growing wet for her again. She seems entranced by the change. Her curiosity will be the death of me, as will her obsession with my breasts.

I shift under her, my fingers tunneling into her hair. "You are very distracting."

She glances up at me, biting her lower lip, her eyes glowing with mischief. "How?"

Oh, she knows exactly what she's doing, doesn't she? I take her hand, covering my breast with it, moaning at the feel. "You're so curious."

She pouts at me, tightening her hand on my breast. "Why'd you do that?"

I raise a brow, arching into her. "Because I like the feel of your hands on me."

I can still feel the mark of her cold fingers between my legs, her lips on my heated flesh. *Fuck. I need more.* I thought after I had tasted her, I would be free of this hold she has on me. Instead, I'm thinking about all

the other things I can show her. The world of pleasure that she has just started to explore.

She whispers, her voice still ragged from her moans, “I was making a discovery.”

I drop my hand, allowing her to continue her slow, maddening circles around my nipple. My voice is rough from my own arousal. “A discovery?”

Snow blows some cool air onto my nipple, and I bite my lip to keep from moaning. She seems to be content to torture me with the chill of her power. She giggles as my nipples harden again. I would have never thought the innocent sound could be so... *arousing*. I shiver and whisper, “You are insatiable.”

She laughs again, her voice full of wondrous lust. “But look at it! Isn’t it beautiful?”

I bite my lip, reaching out to pinch her dusky nipple roughly, growling, “I like yours better.”

She squeals, trying to pull away from my fingers. “Miss! Those are mine.”

I smirk wickedly, pinching the other. “I think they’re mine now.”

She moans and leans into my touch, looking at my lips, her glacial eyes warming. “Yes... yes, they’re yours.”

I lean forward, kissing her again, drinking in that frosted apple. “They are. Just like you.”

She blushes. “I’m yours?”

Take it back. Those are words of permanence. You can’t give that to her! My stomach twists with the reminder that it’s going to be so much worse when she discovers the truth. Now it’s not just her friend who has betrayed her, but her lover too.

I raise a brow. “Oh?”

Take it back. Take it back. Take it back.

“You... you said...” Snow murmurs. Her expression is crestfallen, and it breaks me to see.

I kiss her again, biting her lower lip. “You are mine.”

Fuck. That was the opposite of taking it back.

Her eyes shimmer with emotion as she wraps a leg around mine, and I wind my arms around her. I would freeze this moment in time if I had the

power, never move on or retreat. I never want to forget this moment with Snow. She fits against my side perfectly, a slight sheen of sweat still covering us. She glows up at me, marveling at my breasts.

“Rest now,” I whisper, kissing her head.

She nods, cuddling closer to me and squeezing me tightly. I pull the blankets around us, stroking her hair until she falls asleep.

When I am sure she is deeply asleep, I maneuver out of her arms, replacing my body with a pillow. I wave my hand negligently, changing the pillowcase to silk and placing her hair in the wrap she wears to sleep. She squeezes the pillow tightly, burying her face into it and whispering sleepily, “Soft...”

I smile at her and pull on my robe before going to the balcony. I stare out at the starlit sky, wondering what I have done.

Without Snow pressed against my side, guilt tears at me. It is an emotion I have little experience with. I rub my temples, trying to erase the images of our bodies entwined, but the scent of frosted apple on my hands overwhelms me. I moan and slam my hands back down on the railing of the balcony. My nails dig into the marble as I try to regain control. I grind my teeth and focus my gaze on the forest.

My wards are still intact. The trees are now kept at bay in a perfect circle around the castle. They can tread no closer, but now Snow can’t venture out.

Fuck, why do I care about Snow?!

Why am I fighting the urge to go back and pull her from sleep with my mouth on her clit? I could make this work. I deserve to be happy, don’t I? Haven’t I given enough? Bled enough? Do I have to give up this too?

I can be good. I can work to deserve Snow. If she were mine, I could leave everything behind and never touch Dark Magic again.

My heart jumps into my throat at the flicker of a shadow above the trees, and those silly dreams of being good die. I can’t be good. I can *never* be good.

I was born evil, and I’ll die evil.

Snow is a weakness I cannot afford. I need to be queen. I need the power that comes from the throne.

Snow is good. I am evil. Those facts will never change.

I brush at something on my cheek, surprised to find it wet. I glance up at the sky, expecting rain. Something that feels like grief feels me as I wipe my hand off on my robe and focus back on the trees. No more dreams. Dreams are for children. I was never a child. I was a weapon, a witch.

I am evil, and I'll never be anything more than that.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

SNOW



Darkness. Everything is dark, cold, and damp. This cold is something I have never felt before. It is sinister and wraps around me, pulling me deep into myself so I can't escape. It penetrates my bones until I can't feel myself anymore. I hate it. The feeling of my heart being frozen over scares me.

Light illuminates the small room, and in front of me is Azura. She is chained to the wall, blood dripping down her torso. Her skin is sickly pale, and her pink lips are drained of life. Tears pour down my face.

"Azura!" I scream. I run toward her but slam into an invisible wall before I can reach her. My heart pounds in my chest as I shoot my hands out, throwing ice shards at the wall, but it has no effect. My icicles shatter, falling to the ground, and my heart stops. How is this possible? Who did this?

I attempt to use my powers again, but I can't. I feel nothing inside me other than my heart beating against my chest.

"Azura! Wake up! Please!" I scream.

"Oh, dear Snow," a voice purrs from behind me.

I spin. "Who's there?"

"Friends of the past," two voices say in unison.

"What do you want?" I ask, my breathing harsh.

The voices laugh, fading into the distance.

"Wait!" I yell, chasing after them.

Azura's scream echoes behind me, and I spin around, watching the love of my life writhe in pain as she pulls against the chains.

...

“Azura!” I scream, sitting up quickly. She isn’t lying beside me, and for a split second, I think the worse.

“Snow?” Azura says from the balcony, looking over her shoulder. I slip out of bed and run to her. Her body looks intact, and her hair sways freely. I wrap my arms around her stomach, burying my face against her back. The scent of orchids surrounds me, and some of my fear subsides. She is truly here.

“Are you alright?” she asks.

“You weren’t in bed,” I say, shaking my head. I can’t tell her about the dream, not after what I saw. I can’t worry her like that. “I got scared.”

She laughs softly and kisses my head. I feel the material of my hair wrap and realize she must have put it on me when I slept. “I couldn’t sleep. Go back and rest.”

“Not without you,” I say, shaking my head.

“Snow.” She sighs.

“Please,” I murmur, kissing her collarbone. She sighs again but takes my hand in hers and leads me back to the bed. I crawl under the comforter and look up at her with big eyes, my lower lip jutting out.

She chuckles, crawling into bed with me. “You know, looking at me like that won’t work. I’m immune to those eyes.”

I close my arms, squishing my breasts together and sticking my lower lip out more.

Azura growls, laying down. “Come here.”

I smile, moving into her arms and nuzzling my face into the side of her breast. I think these might be my new favorite things.

“I’m going to miss this,” Azura says, kissing the top of my head and brushing her hand down my back.

I frown in confusion, my body tensing. “Miss this?”

“When your father comes back,” she replies, continuing to brush her hand along my skin.

“We have to stop?” I ask, still confused. Azura laughs, and the way she does has me shrinking away and rolling over. Why is she laughing like this? Am I being foolish? I thought we were something more.

Little Snow... Won't you ever learn?

“What’s the matter?” Azura asks.

I look out the window, noticing the sun is rising over the trees. "I should get back to my room."

She stiffens behind me. "Perhaps you should."

She never cared. We warned you.

I sit up on the bed, my body trembling as I hold back tears. Azura doesn't even fight for me to stay. Did she feel nothing last night? Didn't she feel the connection between us? When her mouth melded against me? Did she fake her pleasure when I made her scream? Did she not feel the peace when we fell asleep in each other's arms?

I reach for my chemise, slipping it on. I search for my robe, but tears are welling in my eyes, and everything becomes blurry.

"Snow. You knew this had to be temporary." Azura sighs.

No. No, I didn't.

After tasting her, all I could think of was a future with her. I want to wake up with her in my bed every day. I want to kiss her in the gardens, spend time together in the library, and lick every inch of her skin.

I wipe the tear that rolls down my cheek. "I-I k-know."

"Then why are you crying?" she asks, standing.

"I misunderstood," I mutter.

I am falling in love with you.

Azura stands and moves in front of me, framing my face. "It doesn't mean we can't enjoy each other in the meantime."

Until she tosses you away and picks your father.

More tears drip down my face. "I-I...I want to b-be..." My throat closes, and I am unable to speak.

"Oh, sweet Snow," she whispers, pulling me into her arms and pressing my face into her neck. I break down, sobbing into her.

I want to be yours.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

AZURA



As long as I live, I'll remember this moment. It was the moment I took Snow's heart and crushed it. I spoiled this perfect innocent creature who looked at the world with such purity it touched even me. For years, decades, I've wielded dark magic. It has been at the cost of innocent lives born with magic in their blood, but never have I felt truly evil until now.

I am shocked that the wretched blackness growing inside my heart doesn't manifest on my skin. I thought myself evil before this, but now I know I was only a pretender. Today, her broken sobs have sealed my fate, and I will forever be stained and tortured by them.

She chokes back a sob, clutching me as if she can't bear to let me go. "You... you said I-I was y-yours."

I reach out to wipe her tears, unable to lie as she looks at me like this. "You are."

She blinks back more tears, her icy eyes flickering with the pain I caused. "But you... you said this can't l-last."

I should have left her alone and never touched her with my soiled hands. I've turned her into another person broken by the world, crushing her innocence and purity beneath my heel.

"This is complicated, sweetheart," I whisper, framing her face and trying to explain to her what I don't even truly understand.

Why can't we be together? Does it really matter? Can't I just be happy with Snow and forget everything that came before? Maybe if I never use that dark power inside me again, *she* will never find me. It sounds so easy in my head, but those are just fantasies. I know I am on borrowed time.

Snow snuffles, every sound a lash against my dark soul, hitting the heart I thought dead. “H-How?”

I want to reassure her. I want to take it all back and tell her I will never let her go. But *she will* find me, she always does, and she’ll kill me this time. I don’t have a choice.

She’ll come for Snow.

My deadened heart stills in my chest. I need to protect Snow, even if it means breaking her.

“I have to become queen,” I croak.

“Over loving me?” she nearly wails.

I kiss her softly, wishing to stop her pain. “Over everything.”

She crumbles into my arms, and I shift to keep from falling. Have I broken her so thoroughly that she can no longer stand? I truly am a monster. I lift her into my arms and carry her to bed, cradling her against me as if my arms could keep her from breaking.

“You are still mine, but I can never be yours,” I admit, though I wish it weren’t true.

You wouldn’t want me anyway, not the real me.

No, she’d hate the real me. I’m nothing like her, not good, not pure, not anything.

“Why?” she whispers brokenly.

“I must be queen,” I say, brushing a stray piece of hair that escaped her wrap off of her face. As if that offers any explanation or changes anything. As if it could wipe this devastation from her. But I still can’t tell her why.

She pulls away from me, and the temperature of the room drastically decreases, my breath fogging the air. “You said that.”

“I can’t explain to you the full truth, my dear Snow,” I add, forcing a calmness into my voice even as I’m shattering inside.

I can’t explain what I don’t even understand.

She slips from my arms and pulls on her robe, her voice icy and lifeless. “You’re using me.”

Something about the way her voice has changed affects me more than the feeling of ice in the air. My breath fogs the air, and the shiver of cold makes me pull my robe tighter. I shake my head, grabbing her hand. “No. I care for you, but I can’t be with you.”

Not like you deserve.

Her gaze locks with mine, and again, horror leeches through me. Her eyes are no longer the clear ice I'm so used to. The ones that looked at me so tenderly with lust and laughter. They are now frozen over like chunks of murky glaciers and completely unreadable.

"So you used me," she says, her voice utterly lifeless.

I panic, grab her face and kiss her, but only hard, cool ice meets my lips. I pull back and beg, "Please understand."

"How can I? You won't even talk to me."

I growl, kissing her again, searching for how it was a moment ago. "Kiss me back. Like before."

If she kisses me back, maybe I can live with myself. Maybe I'll be able to look in the mirror and not hate what I see.

She looks at me blankly. "I should go."

I kiss her again, but she doesn't respond. There is nothing, none of the warmth from her cool lips, none of her soft, mewling sounds of pleasure. "Snow, please."

Snow pulls away from me, spinning on her heel and leaving me behind. A trail of ice follows in her footsteps. She slams the door, the sound echoing in my soul.

We can only depend on ourselves, Azura. We never look to others. Others are weaknesses.

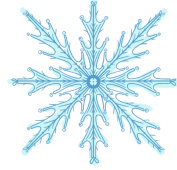
Why couldn't I have just listened and stayed away from Snow? She was pure and perfect, unaffected by me, and I ruined it because I'm a selfish creature. I wanted to touch the purity inside her, coveting it for my own.

I cover my face with my hands and fall to my knees. Tears wet my cheeks, and I wonder that I am even capable of such an act of sorrow. I broke her. I made her just like everyone else, just like me.

Broken by the world.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

SNOW



She used me. The one person I never thought would. *She used me.*

The voices were right. I am nothing more than a naïve little princess. A tool to be used.

My heart, my body, and my soul all feel numb. I should be crying. I should feel something, but I don't. My feet drag, but I keep my chin high. I will not show them I have broken inside like a shattered icicle. I will not break until I am alone in my room and the world isn't watching.

I am everything those princesses have called me. Stupid. Childish. Naïve. How have I gone this long in the world being like this? Why haven't I learned? You let someone in, and they take what you have before pushing you down. They stomp on you until you break.

Poor little Snow White, learning what she truly is. Nothing.

I feel the ice freeze in the cracks of my shields as the pain wraps around me. How could she do this to me? Why would she do this to me? This has all been a game to her. She manipulated me, the stupid little princess, to get close to my father. Azura broke me, and I felt wrapped in ice, untouched by the sun.

Only the heat of her touch can free me from this spell, but that will never happen. She has her plans. She wants to be queen more than she wants me. I will need to get used to the dark, cold world I am now in. The voices will taunt me for eternity, and I will someday become what I should have been a long time ago, a cruel, heartless princess. Just like how it is supposed to be.

As I turn the corner, I see my brother's door open. Belle steps out, and my heart stops beating as I watch the scene unfold. She is wearing nothing but her nightgown, which I now know means things have happened. They had sex or something along those lines. Was Belle using me, too? Were

she and Azura conspiring behind my back to take both my father and brother?

Foolish little Snow. Friendless and used. Should have listened to us.

“Thank you for that,” Belle whispers. “Strangely, I feel better.”

Eric smirks, wiggling his fingers. “Well, I do have the magic touch.”

My stomach turns, and my heart feels like it’s not beating. I grab my chest, forcing out a breath.

Belle shoves Eric and laughs before turning her head. She sees me, and her expression drops. “Snow?”

I back away from the scene, walking down the other hall. I don’t want to hear her excuses. She would insist that they hadn’t had sex. She would say all they did was talk. It would only be lies, right? That is what everyone does. They lie.

Everyone lies, Snow White. It is what has built the very kingdom you live in.

Join us.

Find us.

We will treat you right.

I open the door to my room and lock it behind me. Ice forms on the handle and doorframe, locking me in. I am trapped in this frozen fortress. Ice crystals bloom beneath my feet with each step I take, the entire room freezing in my presence.

“Snow!” Belle says, banging on the door. “Let me explain. Please.”

I don’t respond. Not after what she has done.

Moving into the bathroom and closing myself in. Once alone, I collapse to the ground, sobbing. Each tear that rolls down my face freezes, my skin hardening from the cold. One wrong move and I’ll shatter, and I don’t care.

I don’t care what happens.

For so long, I have tried to fit in and get along with others. If all these people use me and laugh in my face, what kind of ruler will I make? Do I even deserve to be a princess? I have no skill with people. Clearly, I don’t deserve any of this.

You don’t deserve it. Come to us. You know how. We will protect you. We will treat you like the perfect princess you are.

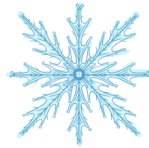
I walk over to the tub and turn on the tap, the hot water steaming the mirrors. I turn it off when it overflows and drop my robe before stepping into the tub. The water cools at my touch, but it doesn't freeze over. It soothes me, the warmth relaxing my body.

It's time to come home, Snow.

You belong to us.

I feel something hard in my hands, and I lift it. A dagger. Small and thin. Freshly sharpened. When did I grab this? I don't even know, but I know what I must do.

I press the blade against my wrist, and everything goes black.



My soul stirs, a sharp pain in the middle of my chest. I place my hand on my stomach, but it only goes through. Looking down at my hands, I see that they are translucent, and a blue glow surrounds my body. Am I dead?

"Awake at last," a male voice echoes in the abyss.

I spin around, squinting my eyes, trying to see into the darkness. A male forms from the shadows. He has pointed ears, overwhelming power, and ageless features. Fae.

I try to step back from the male, but I can't. There is no ground beneath me, only darkness.

"I will be taking the elemental now," he purrs. I feel my power being tugged from my form and I wrap my arms around myself.

"Who are you?" I hiss.

The male tilts his head. "King of the Fae. And you, darling Snow, have been out of my reach for too long."

I frown for a moment, piecing the puzzle together. It doesn't take long until everything is connected.

"You're the one who fairy touched me," I whisper. "Why?"

"Finally using that brain of yours, hm?" A slow grin forms on his face. "The reason why is not important. Soon you won't remember a thing. You will be just another soul drifting in the abyss."

My translucent form freezes over. "Your voice... You were in my head!"

“I’m in every dark crevasse, every thought you shove down. Every shadow. I’m eternal, unending. And I have unfinished business.” He smirks.

His hand extends toward me, and I feel the ice being pulled from my soul. I scream out in pain, placing a hand on my chest.

Wait...

I can feel my chest? Looking down, I see that the ice has created a physical form and my eyes brighten.

There is still hope.

I look over at the king, summoning my ice shards and throwing them toward him. He dodges, but has stopped trying to pry the elemental from my soul.

I grin at him, slowly floating toward him. “I am the ice elemental. You claim to be shadows, well I’m the cold. And I’m about to blast your ass away.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

AZURA



Snow.

I glance up from my hands, the chill leftover from her exit disappearing. The warmth crashes in, suffocating me. Sweat beads on my brow, and my skin flushes with the sudden temperature change. The ice trail she left behind is melting.

Why would it do that? I fan my hand in front of my face, watching as the ice turns to water and evaporates. Her magic is vanishing. Something's wrong.

I bolt out of my room, barely remembering to belt my robe closed. Snow's door is locked. Without a thought to hiding my magic, I spin a spell, breaking it open. A quick sweep of the room shows me it's empty. For the space of a single frantic heartbeat, I think I'm imagining things. But my breath fogs the air, and my gaze snaps to her closed bathing chamber door. I slam my shoulder against the wood until I hear the ice break on the other side. My mind is too scattered, too frantic, to summon my magic.

My heart freezes in my chest when I slip on the blood. My throat is closing, the air refusing to come in as my mind spirals into denial. This is a nightmare. *Wake up! Wake up!* A single blink takes eons, but nothing changes.

Someone shouts her name, begging her to wake up. I can't hear, but my body moves. I try to stem the blood still pouring from her fragile arm. Why won't it stop bleeding?

I grab the back of her neck, my hands slippery with her blood. Someone speaks again. I can't understand the words. Are they screaming?

Her eyelids flicker, the slightest bit of movement, and suddenly I can hear again. My senses are assaulted by my frantic breathing, the pounding of my heart, and the ice crashing to the floor.

"Azura," she says, her voice a broken whisper.

My heart pounds painfully in my chest. "What did you do, darling?" My voice cracks and wobbles as if I've been screaming.

She mumbles, and I can barely make it out. "Never... enough."

A tear slides down my cheek. *Me. She did this because of me.* I broke her far worse than I thought, so deeply that I don't think she can ever be whole again. I can't let this be. Snow deserves a long, happy life, full of smiles and laughter. Others need to experience her love, her innocence, and purity. This won't be her end.

This will never be her end.

I reach up and flick my tear onto her wound, the tips of my fingers turning black. My body hums and vibrates as I call up every ounce of dark magic I possess. My hair lifts from my back, floating around me, black flames dancing around the room, reacting to my power.

This is not your end, Snow.

"Tear of despair, blood of the pure, soul of the damned," I chant, my veins burning, turning black, magic ripping through me. I slam my hand into Snow's open palm, gripping it, the fire focusing to a pinpoint, crossing from my hand to hers.

The midnight power travels up her arm, sealing the wound shut, leaving the mark of an apple tree behind. It is a mark of the dark power I've used. My inner arm burns, and I know a matching mark is branding itself there. A sign of the power, I can add it to all the rest I conceal with glours.

I fall back from the tub, breaking the connection, focusing my remaining power to heal the wound that's now on my arm. I hiss as the brand bubbles black, opening and closing my fist repeatedly, resting against the wall for support.

It takes a moment for Snow's eyes to open, another for them to sharpen and focus on me.

Another tear slides down my face.

This won't be your end, Snow.

“A-Azura?” her voice is not as breathy as before, gaining strength with each second.

I can’t answer, not yet. I need to focus on healing myself. My power is waning, the black flames dying, my hair falling limply against my face.

I hear her body hit the floor. She crawls over to me, grabbing my wrist and demanding, “What did you do?!”

I did one good thing in a lifetime of evil.

“I can’t lose you, princess,” I hiss.

My wound seals, a black willow etched in my skin. A permanent reminder of the bond now between us. Snow presses her lips to mine. “I can’t lose you e-either.”

“It’s too late. I used too much power. *She* will be coming,” I whisper.

Snow presses her forehead to mine, tears rolling down her face. “Who? Who’s coming?”

I kiss her softly. “I’m sorry, my love. I’m sorry.”

I call on the last dregs of my power and ready myself to shadow away. To keep Snow safe, I will leave her behind.

The only good thing I’ve ever done.

Snow kisses me harder, sensing my power growing again. “Azura. Tell me. Please don’t go.”

A tear slides down my cheek at her entreaty, and I flip my arm over, showing her the mark. “We’re bonded now.”

Snow glances down at her arm. “We are?”

I nod. “I took it to save you. Now, every injury you have will be mine. Until the day I die.”

I laugh waterily, my head coming up at the sound of a massive roar in the distance.

Time’s up. Do one more good thing in this life. Leave Snow behind.

Snow frames my face. “And every injury you receive?”

I shake my head. Of course, she would want to share the burden. “Those will be mine, and mine alone. I love you, dear Snow. I wish I could stay.”

Her falling tears break me. “I love you, Azura. Please, please don’t go.”

Shadows creep up my legs. “I must protect you.”

The only thing I’ve ever wanted more than power is you.

I have to leave her to keep her safe.

“I can take it. Please,” she begs.

The shadows consume me. “Goodbye.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

SNOW



Just like that, she is gone. She was here, kissing me, warming me, bringing me back to life, and then nothing. She said she loves me, and I felt my cold, broken heart beat again when I heard those words, only to shatter when she vanished in my arms.

I never even got to tell her what I had done. My death had broken the bindings of the fairy touch. At least, that is one of the things the King had shouted while we were fighting against one another. If Azura had not revived me in time, who knows where my soul would be now?

She saved me.

I lie on the cold stone floor and curl in on myself, sobbing loudly. The ice shatters from my cries and rains down on me. The shards cut into my skin, but I don't feel the pain, only the trickle of blood down my skin. This feeling in my chest is different from before. Earlier I felt numb, but now I feel sad and beyond broken. I need her. I want her, but she is gone, and it is all my fault.

The bathroom door creaks open.

"Snow?" Belle calls out. I don't respond, curling in tighter on myself. "Snow White!"

Belle runs to my side, lifting and cradling me against her chest. She rubs her hands roughly against my shoulders, trying to warm my frigid body. Her expression is horrified as she looks at the floor, and it's the first time I notice all the blood.

"Snow. What happened?" she asks.

"She's gone," I whisper brokenly.

"Who's go—" Belle frowns. "Azura? Where'd she go?"

"She's gone." I whimper, my eyes watering again. Belle cups my face in her hands, rubbing her thumbs gently over the curve of my cheeks.

“Snow, you need to tell me what happened,” she says calmly.

I gulp, my throat dry as I lift my wrist. The cuts have healed, leaving behind a tattoo of an apple tree. The apples are not their usual red but purple, and a thin blue thread trails into the trunk of the tree, pulsating on my skin. I know instinctively it is a physical manifestation of our connection. She is still alive, still well. The purple apples on my skin seem to pulse to show me her heartbeat is steady. I let out a silent breath of relief.

“I... hurt myself,” I whisper, my cheeks flushing with shame. “Azura saved me.”

“Oh, Snow.” Belle pales, her hand dropping to my arm, her thumb rubbing my wrists.

I know she blames herself, just like Azura does, but this isn’t their fault. It is all mine, along with the King of Fae. But he still won, pushing me over the edge where I fell into darkness.

“She used her power to save me. I felt her calling to me while I was fighting the Fae King.” I take a shaky breath. “Someone has been hunting her and when she used her magic, they found her. And then she disappeared.”

I choke back a sob. “This is all my fault.”

Belle stares at me for a moment. No doubt she has a thousand questions, but she doesn’t push for answers. Instead, she pulls me into a tight hug, rubbing my back. “We will find her, alright? We will.”

“How?” I cry out. “I... I don’t even know where to start!”

“We will find a way,” Belle reassures me.

But how? Would we find a way quick enough? Who knows what kind of trouble Azura is in, and it is all my fault that she was discovered. The threat of the Fae King is still in the back of my mind, but that can be dealt with later. I need to ensure that Azura is okay. I need to find her.

I close my eyes. *Think Snow. Think.* There has to be a way to track her down. Her magic is strong, though. I can still feel the effects of her power running through my veins. It is nothing I have ever seen before. Only strong magic would be able to track her down.

My mother would have been able to do it. She was one of the most powerful Elemental users in history before she died. The power went to Eric shortly after, along with some of her strength. She had more than just

the ability to manipulate water. She used artifacts that she later hid away in the tower.

“My mother’s mirror,” I whisper, my eyes widening. The artifact can show you whatever you desire. Mother told me she retrieved it from a witch, but she gave me no other details other than it was one of the most powerful objects in her possession. It is possible it could show me Azura.

“What?” Belle frowns.

I pull out of Belle’s embrace and stand, running into my bedroom to change into a thin dress. “She had this mirror that answered questions.”

“And? Where is it?” Belle asks.

“Her tower. None of her things have been moved from it on my father’s orders. So, it must be there,” I reply.

“Then we should hurry.”

The two of us rush from my room and down the hallway. We pass multiple servants who throw us questioning glances, but I ignore them all. I can’t stop now. Not while the love of my life is in danger.

I keep my muscles cool as we climb the two hundred steps to the tower. The trek is enough to take one’s breath, but I have made this walk over a thousand times. It is nothing when there is so much on the line. Surprisingly, Belle is able to keep up with me, and the two of us reach the top, panting.

My heart stops as I open the door. It looks exactly the same except for the blankets that cover everything, protecting the objects from dust. The room layout hasn’t been changed, and I know if I lift the dust covers, I will see quills, books, and objects of power that are mysteries to me.

I take a few deep breaths before nodding at Belle. Together, we begin our search. I don’t remember the mirror well, just that it was gold, with vines carved into the frame. It was wide and long enough to see the upper half of your body. If you weren’t careful, you could become trapped staring into it, but I believe my mother found a way to counter it. We will find out today.

“It has to be here somewhere,” I mutter a couple of minutes later.

“Are you sure?” Belle huffs. “Isn’t it supposed to be a big mirror?”

I nod. “Supposedly.”

“What’s it supposed to be?” a voice says.

Belle and I both jump, spinning toward the sound. The mirror is there, hanging on the wall. It is bigger than I remember and has a golden face floating in the middle of the silver surface. The golden vines seem to have sprouted roses that cling to the mirror itself. I gulp.

“How the fu—” Belle begins.

“Lannnguagggeee,” the mirror says in a singsong voice.

I blink a couple of times in confusion. “You weren’t there before.”

“I come and go when I please,” the mirror says in a bored tone. “It is a part of my contract with your mother. To serve and be loyal while having the freedom to come and go whenever I like. Much better than my last contract with that old hag.”

“How convenient,” Belle mumbles.

I gulp. So my mother made a deal with the mirror? Would it break if he found out she is dead? The mirror is supposed to know everything, so why is it still here? I could spend time asking the mirror all these questions, but my worry fills me with a sense of urgency. I will get my answers another day, another time.

“Can you help us?” I ask.

“Depends, Daughter of King Julius. Can I?” it asks.

Belle groans. “I’ve read about these mirrors. There are only three of them in the world, and they can be quite tricky.”

I take a shaky breath. “We need to find Azura. Help us track her.”

“Uh-uh. What’s the magic word?” it sings.

“Um...” I frown. Magic word? I really don’t remember any of this.

Belle groans and pinches the bridge of her nose as she says in a rush, “Mirror, mirror on the wall, we have a question for you to solve.”

“Perrrfect,” it purrs.

Belle looks at me, nodding her head.

I hold my breath. “Where is Azura?”

The mirror scrunches its nose. “Oh, that’s no fun! It makes it all too easy.”

“Please, Mirror,” I whisper, tearing up. “I need to find her.”

The mirror sighs before nodding. He stares out behind us, his dark eyes going vacant. I wring my hands together while waiting. It takes a couple of minutes before the mirror’s golden irises return, and it looks down at me sadly.

“Snow, the rumors are true. You have the magic touch to make any creature want to help you, but I’m sorry to say, I cannot sense her. She is deep within the Mystic Woodlands. Though there is someone who can help you find her,” the mirror says.

“Really? Who?” I ask, my eyes brightening. That is better than nothing.

“The Beast,” it replies.

“The Beast?” Belle questions.

The mirror smiles. “Would you look at that? My time is up! Ta-ta.”

Just as quickly as he appeared, the mirror vanishes before our eyes, leaving us with more questions. My brows knit together as I try to think.

“Who the fuck is *the Beast*?” Belle hisses. “That mirror is so—”

“Azura’s horse,” I blurt, interrupting her.

The two of us look at each other before bolting for the stables.

CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

AZURA



My shadows take me to one of my old bolt holes, somewhere I know my mother will never find. If she was taking off right as I left Snow, it would take time for her to fly to me. That's assuming she doesn't return to human form and shadow here herself. There are too many variables for me to adjust and account for. I can only go with my instincts and pray they don't lead me astray.

Fuck. I scramble through the shelves, looking for anything that might build my magical reserves back up. Unicorn horn? No. Leprechaun's corpse? No. Banshee's tongue? No. None of my many magical items will give me what I need at this moment. Dark magic is not like Elemental. I need to squeeze the magic from those born with it in their veins to make spells, enchantments, and protections. Even my glamor is falling at the moment. The tattoos and sigils that cover almost every inch of my skin flicker in and out of existence. The only one remaining steady, unaffected by my glamor, is my bond to Snow.

I trace my finger over the tree on my inner forearm. At least Snow was safe. So long as the willow flourishes on my arm and apples form and fall on my skin, I know she's safe.

My one good deed.

She'll move on, forget all about me, have children, and be happy. She'll make others smile, their lives brighter from her presence. The world is not ready for a life without Snow. The world can't exist without Snow White.

If she died... I can't think like that. Even the thought makes the contents of my bolt hole shake with barely contained magic. I don't know what

would have happened if I'd been too late. Something dark and fetid uncurls inside me, whispering for me to punish the world that almost took Snow White from me.

A jar full of tiny faerie wings falls and shatters on the ground, making me jump. The fairy dust clouds the air, and I cough, choking on the pure magic. *Fucking fairies*. The fairy dust clogs my throat, invigorating me slightly, replacing some of the power drain. The creatures are still a nuisance, even after they are dead.

Fairies! Shit! How could I have forgotten? Snow is still in danger. The forest encroached ever closer. The older Snow gets, the more powerful she becomes, and the more the fairies want her back. Shit! I slam my hand against the side of my head, trying to focus through the haze. I made sure she is protected in the castle, but what if she goes out?

Time is running out, and soon my protections will fail. I grind my teeth, looking at the single black box on the shelf. My mouth goes dry as I push aside my emotions and open it. The hinge creaks and dust scatters. How long has the box sat on that shelf untouched?

My hand shakes as I reach inside, gripping the contents. The empty box makes a dull echo when it hits the floor, the sound muffled by the rug. I try to keep control of my fragile emotions, but after earlier with Snow, I can't seem to stop the tears. I haven't cried since I was a child, but now I seem to be on the verge constantly. Snow changed me. She would hate me if she knew the truth and what I am about to do.

It doesn't matter. There's only one thing that matters in my world. One good deed that I must always protect.

I am trembling as I raise the contents of the box to my mouth. My teeth sink into the flesh. It's tougher than I thought it would be. Normally, I would cook it or mix it in some sort of spell, but I don't have time.

Tick tock.

I force my mouth around another bite, struggling not to retch. I drop to my knees, determined to do this for Snow. *Bite*. Keep her safe. *Swallow*. One good deed. I take another bite and choke on the taste, the hard, leathery flesh forcing its way past my throat. There was a reason I never resorted to this before, why I kept this power sitting on a shelf gathering dust.

Once I finish consuming, I drop to my hands, gagging, my body trying to expel it. It tears at my insides, trying to make me purge it. What I just did is unnatural. It's evil, dark magic, and for several minutes, I'm not sure if I'm going to keep it down. I can feel the power inside me rebelling. My fingers are glowing. The pure original magic is turning dark inside of me. I'm not the predestined holder of the magic, nor am I the current holder.

I was never supposed to be a Vessel to an Elemental Spirit. Not like Snow or Eric. But even after they pass and the Elemental goes to a new Vessel, their bodies will still contain a surfeit of the magic. They are not human, not truly. You have to be special to survive the power of an Elemental, and holding one of the original four is the closest thing to divinity our world will ever see. The four made this world in an explosion of magic, and when I heard that one of their Vessels had died, I hurried to her corpse and stole what I could. The power had already passed on to the next Vessel, but I can feel the remnants in me. Snow and Eric live with this inside them? Every day?

They would despise me if they knew what I just did. It's better that I never see her again. How could I ever face her after eating her mother's heart?

CHAPTER FORTY

SNOW



Belle and I arrive at the stables out of breath. The horses are stomping their hooves uneasily, a couple neighing at the sight of our arrival. I slowly walk past the stalls, calming the horses. They all seem to settle when they see me. I stop at Doc's stall to slide a soothing hand along his neck. He seems restless, probably sensing my anxiety through our bond.

After pressing a kiss to his velvety nose, I move to Beast's stall. He slams against his door, and I jump. I remember him being aggressive, but I know how to calm him.

Belle squeals. "Is that him?"

"Yeah." I nod and hold my hand out, summoning a snowflake. The Beast stares at it for a moment before chomping it and slamming his body against the gate again. I jump back from the gate, and Belle storms forward.

"Listen here, you stupid horse! You're going to help us!" Belle exclaims.

The Beast snarls, slamming against the gate again and splintering it. I scream and throw my hands out, creating an ice wall to keep him in. My powers feel different, stronger. I shake my head, pushing the thought aside until later.

"Let's not yell at the horse!" I exclaim.

"Yeah, yeah," Belle hisses at the wall. "Now what?"

I chew my lower lip, trying to think. Azura had said that the horse used to be the rudest of men. My eyes widen. *Was she talking literally?!*

"No, she didn't," I mumble.

"What?" Belle asks.

"I think the horse is a man."

"What?!"

The Beast rears, slamming his hooves against the ice. We don't have much time. The ice is starting to crack.

"We need to turn him back!" I say.

Belle nods. "Alright, alright. I think I know a spell, but I can't wield magic."

"I can do it."

Belle nods again before letting out a breath. "You'll want to get in front of him."

I nod, moving in front of the ice wall where his shadow is. "And then?"

"Close your eyes and ground yourself. Once you are grounded, stretch your projecting arm out and pull the magic inside him in," Belle instructs.

I nod again and close my eyes. I reach my magic into the ground through my feet. Ice emerges from the ground and crawls up my legs, feeding me power from the earth. It hums through my body, and I extend my hand, allowing the glowing blue magic to jut forward into the Beast. I feel it anchor into something inside him, and I pull. Dark magic flows from him into my arms, turning my veins black. It's heavy, strong, and potent, but I am able to draw it from him.

"Send it out the other hand and then say *fluch umgekehrt*," Belle informs.

I take a deep breath, pushing the dark magic out of my other hand before whispering, "Fluch... umgekehrt."

White light surrounds the Beast, and I step back, covering my eyes. The horse whines, the ice shatters, and steam roils. When the air clears, a man is kneeling in the middle of the broken ice, his skin tanned and scarred. His shoulders bulge with heavy muscles, and his shaggy brown hair glints in the light. He looks up at us, and I see a deep scar that crosses his left eye, going from his eyebrow to his lower cheek. I think I hear Belle whimper beside me.

I scream, "Ew! Naked man!"

"It's alright, Snow." Belle tilts her head. "It's nothing impressive."

Then why did you whimper?!

The man stands straight, and I cover my eyes to avoid looking at the dangly thing between his legs.

"I am free," he growls, sending an uncomfortable shiver down my spine.

Belle crosses her arms. "Not yet, you aren't."

She nods at me, and I seal all the exits with ice. The man locks his eyes on Belle and grabs her by the throat, lifting her from the ground.

"I will kill any who dare take my freedom from me again," he growls.

I step forward, my body trembling. "Please, sir. We... I just need help."

His eyes glow red. "Ten years trapped as a beast. No one will take my freedom from me. Never again. Not that bitch. Not you."

Belle spits into his eyes, and I wince. I love the girl, but I silently reprimand her for egging him on. I watch the muscles of his arm flex, his grip tightening on my friend's neck. She claws at him, gasping for air.

"So easy to break," he says. Belle's face starts to turn blue, her breathing becoming shallow.

"Please let her go! We broke the spell!" I plead, tears filling my eyes.

The man looks between her and me before dropping her to the ground. She gasps for air and coughs, rubbing her neck,

"For that, you have my thanks," he says.

I move forward, taking the man's hand. "I need your help, and then you never have to see us again. Please."

His eyes narrow. "What is it you want?"

I chew my lip, gulping. "Take me to Azura's castle."

"Bitch," he snarls.

I flinch away from him. "Please... I... I love her."

Belle weakly stands, placing a hand on my shoulder. It doesn't help the anxiety gnawing at my stomach.

"She trapped me as a horse and used me as a beast," he growls.

I lift my chin. "What she did was not right, but I can help her be better."

He snarls, dragging his claws against the ice walls. "Drop this prison!"

I shake my head. "Not until you promise to take me to her."

"She is evil," he snarls. "There is only one person to who she would bow. Someone so horrifically vile all shudder just hearing her name."

Just him speaking of this mysterious person makes me shiver, but I don't stop pushing. "Take me to her."

"She doesn't love you. She can't." He glares at me. "It's not her nature."

I look at him for a moment. How do I make him believe? How do I show him I am right?

She does love me. She sacrificed herself to save me.

I lift my hand to push my hair away from my face and glimpse my wrist. *That's it.* I pull my sleeve up, showing him my tattoo.

"She saved my life by taking my injury as her own," I say.

"You're dreaming," he snarls.

"I'm not!"

The man is silent, looking at me for a long time. "I owe you a boon for freeing me. Ask for something else, anything else."

I shake my head. "I need this."

He snarls, closing his eyes. "This is the end of me helping that bitch. Understood?"

"I understand," I say, nodding quickly.

He is silent again. "I'll take you to her. Alone."

"Fuck no!" Belle protests. "I'm not leaving her with a brute like you."

"Then she doesn't go," he snarls.

Belle walks forward, poking his chest. "If you think I'm going to leave her, you've got another thing coming."

"Belle..." I gulp.

She looks back at me, shaking her head. "Oh, no. What would your brother say?"

"He'd say no," my brother's voice echoes from behind us.

I spin around. "Eric!"

Eric is standing by the door, his hands in his pockets. "I knew something was odd about that woman." He looks at me, his eyes softening. "You love her?"

I nod. "I do."

My brother searches my eyes for a moment before sighing. "Then go."

"What?!" Belle hisses, my expression matching Belle's words. He is letting me go? Into danger?!

The man twitches his head from side to side, his hands slowly becoming claws. "Decide, or I'll lose control and kill you all."

Just a bit intense.

Eric only snorts at his response. He strolls forward, wrapping his arm around Belle's shoulder. "No, you won't."

Belle sighs. "Can Snow and I have a moment?"

The man doesn't respond, though his breathing becomes more ragged, his body larger. Belle only rolls her eyes before taking my hand and

pulling me away. I drop the ice walls just before we step outside.

“What’s wrong?” I ask.

Belle sighs, looking around. “I just... I wanted to clear something with you.”

I frown, tilting my head.

“When you saw me with your brother. It’s not what you think,” she says.

She still blames herself for what happened to Azura and me. I frown.

“Then what is it?”

Belle licks her lower lip. “He helped me out with a few things. I was having a moment, and he talked me through it.”

I search her eyes. Something is troubling her, and clearly, it’s something she doesn’t want to relive. I smile softly at her before pulling her into my arms. “I trust you.”

Belle lets out a soft breath. “You’re really going to go with him?”

“Yes. He is my only hope of finding her.”

She squeezes me tighter. “Then be careful, and you better come back.”

I pull away, smiling at her. “I will.”

The two of us make our way back into the stable. Eric is snickering, and I can see the man is just barely holding himself back from beating my brother into a pulp.

“I’m ready to go!” I say.

The man whirls on me, his body rippling and shifting into a massive black wolf with blood-red eyes. He lowers one shoulder just enough for me to climb on.

“Take care of Belle for me?” I ask my brother.

Eric smirks. “Always.”

The Beast snaps his jaws at my brother before launching out of the stables and into the forest.

CHAPTER FORTY-ONE

AZURA



The taste lingers in my mouth, coating my tongue and rolling my stomach. Each is a reminder of what I have done. I have used magical beings to power my magic before, their wings, eyes, tongues, and even hearts, but never have I consumed a Vessel's heart. My nails dig into my palms as I leap over a fallen log, running deeper into the forest. Even as the trees move around me, the path is burned into my mind. They whisper and dance, trying to confuse and dissuade me from my destination. I blast the trees with my power, throwing them back when they try to block the path again, cinders and smoke curling from the leaves and trunks. I am normally not so careless. You don't want to make an enemy in this forest, and the trees can be a terrible enemy. But right now, I don't care.

I have to protect Snow.

The sound of discordant screeching grows louder the farther I run. The trees scratch and cut me, seeking revenge for their fallen brethren. I need to keep running. I can't stop, don't stop.

One good deed.

I burst through the crowded tree circle and into the glistening glen. I hiss when I see that I've lost most of my skirt in my rush. Cuts decorate my arms and legs, but I barely feel them.

My gaze focuses on the creatures in the circle of toadstools. I brush the lingering tree branches off my dress, straighten my back, and stride forward as if I don't have a care in the world.

Feign it, even if your knees are shaking and you're about to collapse.

My hands don't tremble as I cross them in front of me. I link my fingers and incline my head to the glowing beings at the center of the toadstools.

It takes a heartbeat for the fae to look at me. His eyes spark, containing the entire night sky. He looks me over from head to toe, his dark hair cut short, making his eyes even more disconcerting. The magical shield drops, and he gestures for me to enter. I keep my head high as I enter the circle. A seat forms across from him, and I take it as if it is my due. The lesser beings bow to him, but no one knows where he came from. The rumors are that there is a portal to a land full of his kind, where light and dark fae are divided by a mystical boundary.

The fae king looks me over. A cruel smirk lights his unnaturally angular features, offsetting the ethereal glow of his skin. I have no doubt which side of that boundary he was born on. I sit calmly, readjusting my nearly non-existent skirt as if it were a glittering gown. Everything about the fae is meant to disarm. I need to focus. I am here for a reason.

One good deed.

The fae king looks me up and down again. "I know why you're here."

I lift the teacup that appears in front of me. I know not to drink unless I wish to be enslaved to the high fae. These are simple rules that were drilled into my head as a child.

"You do?" I ask, carefully wording my question to not give anything away. Even one slip could end with the fae owning my soul. That's assuming I have a soul to bargain with.

The fae king lifts a perfectly shaped tea cake to his lips, smirking as he takes a bite, observing me. It takes all of my control not to snap at him in impatience. My nerves are frayed, and every moment I remain still, I can feel the approaching darkness. With each passing breath, the remains of the Vessel's heart makes its way out of my system, taking the magic I need with it. I should have headed straight to face her after the magic hit, but instead, I went to the fae king. My priorities have shifted.

Snow.

I don't know what will happen when my world is consumed in darkness. The clock is counting down in the back of my head, the sound becoming louder and louder. I must protect Snow. It is my one redemption.

The fae king smiles indulgently. "There is little that goes on in this realm that I don't know about."

I tense slightly at that. “Oh?”

I need to keep every word out of my mouth in the form of a question. A statement can be used to trap me into a deal for my power and soul with the fae king. It’s that easy to end up indebted to the fae.

“You are here to discuss the young Snow White,” the fae king says, taking another bite of the overly perfect tea cake. Each flex of his jaw as he chews puts me more on edge.

Does he truly have eyes everywhere? *The eyes in the trees. The water watching.* Have I just fallen into a trap? I barely stop myself from flinching with the realization.

Out of habit, I take a sip of the tea and then tense with horror. *Poison.* Everything I know and every precaution I’ve taken is lost in a single moment of carelessness.

The fae king’s smirk widens as the teacup falls from my frozen hand. He stands from his seat, brushing his hands down his midnight jacket. “Alas, you were not the first dark sorceress to make a deal with me.”

All light vanishes from the glowing glen, the sound of massive wings descending. I can do nothing but sit there, the poison in the tea keeping me frozen in place. He mentioned Snow, and I’d forgotten everything, falling directly into his trap.

Into her trap.

Metal claws brush my skin, pulling my hair back over my shoulder. I can’t even shiver. I know those claws, hearing them clink against each other, the sparkling diamonds on the edges able to cut through the chest of any foe.

“Hello, my daughter,” Maleficent purrs into my ear. “Time to go home.”

CHAPTER FORTY-TWO

SNOW



Hours go by, the wind blowing through my hair and tears keeping my cheeks wet. In the past, I would have frozen solid due to the freezing weather. Now I seem to be absorbing the cold, the chill powering my magic, making it stronger.

The Beast is incredibly fast. I can't even lift my head from his fur for fear of flying off. He is the most physically powerful being I have ever come in contact with. I use my powers to keep his muscles cool, allowing him to go faster and run longer. The power of his muscles as he grips the earth is magnificent, and I can't help but admire him. With his speed, I will be with Azura again very soon. Together, we will fight this darkness.

Whispers appear on the wind, and I am able to feel them all around me. They call to me from deep within the woods. Their voices try to pull me from the beast, their power strong and luring. Not as strong as Azura's, but it's close.

"Wait, stop. Stop!" I call. The Beast snarls at me, galloping forward. "Stop!"

He growls, skidding to such a hard stop that he tosses me off his back. I land face-first into a pile of dirt, groaning as pain explodes in my nose.

"This is not the agreement," the Beast growls, turning back into a human.

I sit up, looking out at the forest. "Something is calling for me."

He growls deep in his chest. "If you stay, I will consider this fulfilled."

I look him up and down, thinking about this for a moment. He was the only person who could lead me to Azura. Yet, my instincts are telling me to go to them. I will find Azura another way.

"I understand," I murmur.

The man looks around before growling again. "Farewell, Princess Snow."

He transforms back into a wolf before running back the way we came. I stare after him for a couple of minutes before standing up. A giggle comes from behind the trees, and I spin on my heel, trying to locate the source of the sound.

Another fae to use their magic against me? No, the energy in the air feels different. It feels... friendly?

"He'll be back. She kept him as a Beast," one of the voices sings.

"Who's there?" I gulp.

"Hello, little fae," a small figure hums, floating forward. Several others followed her. *Pixies*. They have sharp noses, pointed ears, and tiny wings attached to their small bodies. Small bodies flap their tiny wings. Each of the seven is a different color of the rainbow: red, orange, yellow, green, pink, blue, and violet. They are a subspecies of fairies known for their tricks and cunning, but the aura around these seven feels different.

I blink a few times. "Fae? No, no, I'm very human."

"Only part. You are the Vessel for the Ice Elemental. Just as your escort was the Vessel for the Beast Elemental," the orange pixie sings.

"The Beast?" I blink. That would make sense. How else would a man turn into an animal at will?

"Yes," the violet one says.

"You think he just discovered the ability randomly?" the green one hums.

"Or your ice ability?" the red winks.

I look down at my hands. "I've always had them, but Eric—"

"He is the Vessel for one of the oldest and most powerful elementals. The Water Elemental," the blue says, cutting me off.

"He didn't always have the power, though, did he?" I whisper, piecing everything together.

"He only inherited it after its previous Vessel passed on," the blue pixie replies.

"Your mother." The yellow sighs and my heart clenches in my chest. I knew this. She would always show me her tricks. She would take us out to the sea, and we would watch the sunset. It made the world feel magical. Then she died, and everything went bland.

"Why did they choose us?" I ask.

"We do not know how Vessels are chosen," the green one says.

“Only that they are,” the pink adds.

I frown for a moment. “Then what about Azura?”

They all freeze for a moment before the yellow pixie says, “She practices dark magic.”

“At a terrible cost,” the green adds.

“Can I save her?” I ask, my throat tightening.

The pixies look at each other before turning back. “Not as you are.”

“Then tell me how,” I plead.

The pixies pause. “Will you do whatever it takes, Snow White?”

“I will.” I nod without hesitation. *For her, I will do anything. Even if that means becoming fairy touched once more.* The red pixie slams into my stomach, and I scream out from the pain, the back of my neck burning.

“What are you doing?!” I exclaim. They don’t respond. Instead, the orange one slams into my stomach like the other, and the heat on my neck intensifies. The rest follow, the burning sensation moving down my spine until I am on my knees, panting. Sweat drips off my brow as the pain slowly subsides. That is when the voices start to clamor in my head, and I can’t differentiate which pixie is saying what. They all sound like one, and it hurts. I press my fingers against my temples to ease the pain.

This is different than when the Fae King was inside my mind. These fairies feel light in my mind even as their voices chatter until I can’t think a thought of my own.

“Quiet. Quiet, please,” I whisper. Their voices lower, and I let out a sigh of relief.

“The castle is ahead,” the Red whispers, the back of my neck tingling as she speaks.

“Danger in every step,” the orange voice adds. Her voice is surprisingly soothing, warming the tip of my spine. There is danger ahead. Azura needs me, and nothing will stop me from getting to her.

I slowly stand, letting out a shaky breath. “I can do this.”

“We are with you,” yellow says quietly.

“Happy thoughts... happy thoughts,” the green sings.

“We are with you,” the pink whispers.

“Shh! She is trying to concentrate,” the blue scolds.

“You’re talking, too!” the violet one exclaims.

I close my eyes, trying to ignore their bickering. I focus on the green pixie's words and mutter them under my breath, giving myself strength.

“Happy thoughts... Happy thoughts...” I recite.

CHAPTER FORTY-THREE

AZURA



My feet echoing on the floor of the home is the only sound. I don't shiver at the unnatural chill of the stone. Only one torch lights each hallway, and I am walking in near complete darkness. I have returned to wearing my typical wardrobe. Gone are the pastel confections that helped create the image of lightness, purity, and happiness. The black I am wearing is a reflection of how every inch of me is the dark, evil bitch the world thinks I am. This is the real me.

The me without her.

The change in me doesn't stop me from seeing her everywhere, even feeling her against me. I can nearly feel the ghostly touch of her hands on my cheeks, her body molding to mine. My lips tingle with her kiss, and her frosted apple scent surrounds me.

Wait, kissing me?

I blink dazedly. "D-Dream?"

This must be a dream. There's no way I'm holding her in my arms or that she's kissing me over and over again. Her hands are tangled in my hair, her icy eyes glowing as she looks up at me.

She shakes her head and kisses me again, whispering against my lips, "Real."

I pull her close, every curve fitting to mine. It is too real, too *everything*. My dreams never felt this good. I pull away, reality crashing in. Snow is here. In the castle. With my mother.

"You can't be here," I hiss.

“I’m here to save you.” Her words flood me with emotion. Of course, my brave princess headed straight for me. No one has ever cared for me as she has, and no one ever will again. I grab her hand and pull her toward the front door, hoping that I can sneak her out before my mother returns.

“You can’t save me. You need to leave now!” I whisper, continuing to pull her.

She digs her heels in, tugging against my hold. “Not without you!”

I whip around to face her again, trying to memorize every beloved feature while at the same time insisting, “Yes! Without me! I can’t come with you. You should forget all about me!” In my desperation, I turn to magic. “I’ll make you forget.”

I have never been able to push past those icy walls in her mind, but since being home, my mother has forced heart after heart on me. I am a wellspring of power, each bite making me feel more and more wretched, more and more lost. What little was left of my soul has been chipped away, piece by piece.

“Don’t you dare!” Snow snarls, trying to yank her hand from mine, but my grip tightens.

My hand sparks with the dark magic. Snow struggles as I reach out to touch her face. She struggles, slaps my hand away, and begs, but I grab her tightly. I touch my fingers to her temple and whisper, “I’m sorry.”

The magic glows, and when I look into her mind, I find the icy wall cracked. Before I can hit it, a violet glow blocks my way and forces me out with a shove. When my eyes open, I see Snow’s entire body emitting a violet energy. As I watch, it focuses, the aura dimming and dying.

Her eyes fill with tears. “Azura, please.”

I hiss at her, “What was that?”

That wasn’t Elemental or Snow’s magic. That was completely *new*.

Snow lifts her chin. “Pixies.”

My eyes shoot wide. “You must leave!”

Snow’s eyes gain that determined glint, the one I’ve seen before. “If you do not come with me, I will face her.”

I frame her face, desperate to persuade her. “No, my love, please!”

She kisses me again. “I love you, Azura.”

Another tear slides down my cheek. “I love you, too. Which is why you must go!”

Snow presses her forehead to mine, kissing me deeply. For a moment, I lose myself in the taste and feel of her. She's just so... *Snow*. But the sound of a loud thud on the roof has me pulling away and begging, "Go! Please!"

Snow looks up at the roof. "Pixies, I think I need a sword."

Snow's body glows, her dark clothes turning to scaled armor. Each scale is a different color, a cascading rainbow that matches the shimmering sword that appears in her hand. "Snow, please. You can't fight her. No one can."

I can't count how many corpses I've been forced to remove from our home. So many thought to destroy her, but all had failed.

Snow glances up at me, smiling sadly. "I guess I'll die trying."

That can not happen. I will not allow it. I can't live in a world where she doesn't exist. She is everything light and pure. She's *hope*. For the first time, I understand her name for its true meaning. There is nothing so pure, innocent, and dreamy as the first snowfall of winter.

"I see we have a guest," my mother says, her voice smooth with a sinister edge.

I position myself in front of Snow. "She was just leaving."

Snow steps out from behind me, her prism armor and sword shimmering. "No. I wasn't."

Maleficent's head comes up, her nostrils flaring. "I smell power."

Snow gulps audibly, her hand tightening on the sword. "I will be taking Azura and leaving now."

I move in front of her again. "It's nothing, Mother."

Maleficent's movements are unnatural and jumpy as if time skips in between each movement. Her lips curl back from her teeth, showing the pointed edge of each one. "Fairy magic. And my daughter isn't going anywhere."

I know it's too late. The Ice Elemental and pixie magic are leaking from Snow. My mother is already gathering the dark energy in the room, powering up to strike against Snow. She wants to kill the love of my life and eat her heart to claim her power. I can't let that happen. I won't let it happen.

I hurl magic at Maleficent, even though I know I can do nothing. My power is a whispered breath compared to the hurricane force of hers, but I have to try. My need to protect Snow is a driving force, and I keep

shooting spells at Maleficent. She deflects or absorbs each strike, and I glance at Snow for a moment, thinking of all the things I never got to say to her. I should have told her how much I loved her innocence, her purity, her way of looking at the world. But I won't get the chance.

Maleficent grabs a spell I throw at her and links with me. She uses the open line to suck the life and power from me, taking everything I have. All the dark magic I have accumulated over six hundred years of life is sucked from me. I feel my skin tighten, wither, and dry.

I drop to my knees. My bones shatter from the impact, and I know nothing more.

CHAPTER FORTY-FOUR

SNOW



This cruel, vindictive bitch is Azura's mother? She will die for everything she has done to Azura. She better pray that my woman is all right because when I'm done with her, she won't know what hit her.

Maleficent licks her lips, tilting her lizard-like head at me. "I'll be taking that power now."

I gulp, twisting the sword in my hands. "You won't be getting anything."

"I take what I please." Maleficent smirks and flicks her fingers. Azura's body twists and crumples to the floor. I scream, the windows shattering from the force of my grief. No! No, no, no, no! This can't be possible. She can't be dead. She can't be gone. No!

There is a hole in my chest where happiness and joy once thrived. The spot in my heart for Azura is now an empty void that will never be filled again.

Maleficent laughs and lifts her hands above her head, summoning an enormous ball of dark green smoke. I fight the tears that threaten to pour down my face before rolling away and moving behind a column. She throws the ball, and I scream as the top of the column shatters, raining debris down on my head. I don't have time to react as she throws another, obliterating the wall beside me. I crouch, getting myself lower to the ground and throwing up an ice shield to protect myself from the next onslaught of attacks.

"Oh, gods. Oh, gods," I hiss.

"Snow, you must fight!" the blue pixie yells in my head. The next volley of dark energy hits the column and breaks through my ice, but a blue shield forms around me, protecting my body from harm. I feel the energy of the blue pixie dim, and I choke back a sob.

"Fight..." the fairy whispers before her voice is silenced.

I spin around and come face to face with a dragon. Her black scales glimmer in the torchlight, a hint of green glowing from beneath them. How am I going to defeat this? My powers seem to be growing weaker by the second. I need more time to think and look around, searching for somewhere to hide. My gaze catches on the stairs, and I bolt for them. Maleficent roars, and I cover my ears, muffling the deafening sound. The dragon lifts her hand, breaking the top of the stairs into a thousand pieces. A green light radiates from the gap, filling the walkway as I push forward.

“Be strong...” the green pixie whispers before fading away. Her power is ripped from me, but I can’t stop to mourn her loss, not until the battle is over. I run across the second floor of the castle, my mind still swirling. I turn around for a moment, shooting frozen shards from my palms, but they do little damage to the dragon. She must have protection against my magic. The sword will be the only thing that can kill her.

“Come on,” I whisper to myself, sweat dripping down my back. I focus on the dragon’s back. If I can just get on her, then I can thrust the sword into the back of her neck. I spot the curtain and take a deep breath. Pink wings form on my back as I start running, pushing me faster and harder. I outpace the dragon snapping at my heels as the pink pixie calls, “For love!” I feel her power dim and then disappear.

“Swift as the sun,” the yellow pixie whispers in my mind. I jump onto the curtain and swing forward, landing on the dragon’s back. Maleficent’s roar echoes through the room, the castle trembling and stone falling. She shakes her body, trying to throw me off. I hold on, my palms bleeding from gripping the sharp scales.

“We believe in you,” the yellow pixie whispers before fading away.

I huff out a breath, lifting my sword up and slamming it down on her scales. It is useless. They are too strong and thick. Maleficent throws her head back, and I slip off, slamming hard onto the ground. An orange aura glows around me, and my body slowly mends itself, my breathing steadying.

“Love is strong,” the orange pixie whispers before vanishing.

Tears blur my vision, but I wipe them away impatiently. I don’t have time for tears. I have to keep fighting so that their sacrifice is not in vain and to avenge the love of my life. I watch the dragon prepare to blow fire.

As she inhales, filling her lungs, my eyes fall on her chest. I need a soft spot. I need to hit her heart.

“One chance,” the red pixie whispers in my ear, my sword glowing red as all the power transfers from me to it. “Aim true.”

The dragon roars, her head up. Green flame licks the ceiling, and I roll my shoulders. This is my last chance.

I lift the sword over my head before swinging it forward with all my strength. I watch as it sinks deep into Maleficent’s chest. Green blood spurts from her, and she screams in agony. She strikes out, raking her claws forward, slashing my stomach. I fall back onto my ass, my crimson blood staining the marble floor. Black flames crawl up Maleficent’s dragon form, consuming her as she wails. I watch as her body slowly evaporates into dust. The only sound left is me gasping for breath.

I lay back on the ground, cold, sticky blood surrounding me. I choke back a sob as I lift my arm to look at my tattoo. A single purple apple gleams on the formerly barren tree, and my eyes widen. The pain slowly starts to subside, and I sit up, watching my wound knit itself closed.

“Azura,” I whisper. I spin around, looking for her, but there is nothing left but her withering corpse. My scream is filled with agony, losing her a second time nearly unbearable. I crawl to her body. “No, no, no, no. Get up! Azura! My love!”

I lift her, cradling her close as tears roll down my cheeks, landing on her face. I create a blanket of snow around us, trying to soothe her and bring her back. “Azura! Azura! Please come back to me! Please! I love you!”

Black flames burst around me, climbing the walls and consuming the castle. What’s left of Azura turns to dust in my arms, her ashes mixing with the snow on the ground.

“No! No, no, no!” I sob. “Come back!”

Nothing happens. There is only fire, dark, black fire. It rages all around me. I sit in the center of it, waiting for it to consume me as well.

CHAPTER FORTY-FIVE

AZURA



There was nothing but black flames. I feel the force and heat of the fire, but it doesn't burn. I feel my body rebuild inch by inch, crafted from the flames. Every piece of me screams in agony as my body slams back together. For every light, there must be dark. Balance is required. There is a power vacuum, and it is one I'm required to fulfill. When the flame cyclone tightens around me, I step through it, naked but very much alive. Every nerve in my body is crackling with power. This power made my head spin. How did my mother carry this inside her?

Snow looks up at me, her face covered with ash and soot, two tear tracks cutting down her cheeks. "A-Azura?"

I look down at her in shock. She won? She killed Maleficent? I glance down at myself and focus on my new power. I summon clothes, dressing myself in a black gown with a deep v and crown. When I move, I see the ends of my platinum hair are now black. "It's me."

Snow stands, still crying. "Truly?"

I nod. "Truly."

Her lips tremble, and she runs to me, jumping on me. It's so *familiar*. Even in this new but old body, with these new powers, there is something so grounding about having Snow in my arms and kissing me. I smile into her mouth, lifting her. "You did the impossible."

She continues kissing me and crying. "I did? I saved you?"

"You did, and you gave me even more."

More power.

Her legs wrap around my waist, her fingers tunneling into my hair, holding me as an anchor. “More?”

I laugh darkly. “All that power had to go somewhere.”

Where there is light, there must always be dark.

“And it’s in you?” she whispers.

I concentrate, and midnight flames crawl up our bodies, taking us to her room in the palace.

There is no drain on me, no need to refuel. “Yes, my love.”

Snow looks around at the room, her body tightening around me. “Are you still going to try to marry my father?”

I laugh again. “No. No, I am not.”

“Are you leaving me again?”

“Do you want me to?”

She shakes her head frantically. “No!”

I frame her face, putting her on her feet. “I brought you here to pack.”

The flames had burned away her armor, and when I scanned her, I felt my power recoil from her back. I will discover what that is all about later.

She blinks at me. “Pack?”

“Yes, for our honeymoon.”

She smiles brightly. “Oh? Don’t you have to marry me first?”

I growl at her. “That will come soon enough. For now, I want to take you away.”

The urge to protect my treasure, and keep her far away from others, is overwhelming.

“We need to tell Belle and Eric that I found you,” Snow whispers. “Then you can take me anywhere.”

“They will attempt to take you from me. I will not allow them. They must die.” The voice that comes out isn’t mine. It’s darker and more dangerous, shadows taking over the room, and I know the flames will not be far behind.

Snow gulps audibly. “Azura, no.”

Mine. Mine. Mine.

“They will steal you,” I hiss.

She shakes her head. “They won’t. They know I’m yours. I’m all yours.” She kisses me hard, her hand grazing my breast. “All yours.”

I relax into her hold, that voice resounding in my head retreating. “My love.”

She nips my lips. “Let us say our goodbyes, and then we can go.”

That is probably wise. I don’t know how long I can reign in this monster growing inside me. I link my hand in hers, turning her wrist over. “Your mark is gone.”

Snow’s eyes widen as she looks at her arm. “No! Why is it gone?”

I look down at my bare arm. “Because I died.”

“You died?! But how are you back?!” she demands.

I smile softly. “You. My mother’s power needed to go somewhere, and you burned too bright for it to go into you.”

Snow tears up, kissing me hard again. “I’m your light.”

My light, my apple. The one flourishing fruit on the dark tree.

“All mine.”

I laugh. “Yours.”

She giggles softly, taking my hand and running from the room. I follow and finally see the outline of what is making my powers recoil. Along her spine are seven glowing tattoos. They start at the base of her neck and disappear beneath her gown. They glow so brightly with power that I can see them through her clothes.

Snow drags me into the hall, where a few remaining princesses sit with the king. Snow blinks. “Father, I thought you were away?”

Belle stands abruptly, looking at Snow, and the king’s eyes fill with tears. He stands and rushes to Snow, pulling her into a hug. I take a step back, trying to beat back the growing darkness. It demands that I destroy all who dare take her from me.

“I’m so confused,” Snow whispers.

“It’s...it’s been a week,” Belle says.

“A week?! How?” Snow demands.

“Time moves differently in the forest,” I say, my fingers still linked with Snow’s.

“I’m just glad you’re all right,” the king says. Belle runs over, hugging me tightly. I tighten my hand on Snow’s, ensuring I keep hold of her. I pat Belle awkwardly, the press of the thing inside me becoming more insistent.

“Snow,” I whisper, my voice strained.

Snow pulls back from her father. "Right. You already know Azura. She is," Snow smiles softly, "my fiancée."

Sweat beads on my brow. It is subtle, but Snow notices and moves back to my side, wrapping her arm around mine.

"I am happy you have found happiness, Snow," the king says. "You have my blessing."

She is mine.

The king must have noticed something in the way my face changed because he says, "Snow, take her home."

Snow smiles, her eyes filled with warmth. "I love you, Papa." She glances up at me. "Home?"

I nod, flames engulfing us again, taking us to another one of my boltholes. It is an isolated mountain castle surrounded by trees and forest. Even as we arrive, Snow refuses to let go of me, and I can hardly blame her.

"I left Belle an invitation if she wants to visit," I whisper to her.

Snow's eyes widened. "You did?"

I smile softly at her. "She'll send word if she wishes to visit, and I'll use my powers to bring her here."

Anything for you, Snow.

She smiles brightly. "I want a wedding one day with my family. When you're ready."

I fall even more in love with her when she adds the qualifier. I brush her hair back from her face. "My mother fought against this darkness now inside me, and she lost."

Will history repeat itself?

"She didn't have someone like me by her side," Snow insists.

"Promise?" I asked, holding her gaze.

She nods, that determined glint in her glacial eyes returning. "I promise."

"I love you."

"I love you, too."

I lift her with my new strength and spin her.

With you by my side, even the darkness inside me quakes.

EPILOGUE

SNOW



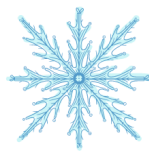
Dear Father,

I'm sorry for not reaching out until now. It's been quite busy here in my new home. Azura is learning how to control her new magic, and I've been busy helping her try to manage it. I am very impressed with how she has handled it so far, and I know she will be a much better sorcerer than her mother. Once she feels ready, we will have a wedding, and I'd love it if you, Eric, and your fiancé, Lady Lock, could come. I want to keep it small and simple. I hope you don't mind that, but it will be easier for the both of us.

I wanted to say thank you for understanding and supporting me with my decision. It means the world to me. Also, I will be there for your wedding. I am so happy that you and Lady Lock matched, and I wish you both happiness. I will see you soon.

Love,

Snow White



I smile to myself, folding the letter and gently stuffing it into the envelope. I melt some purple wax, dripping it onto the back of the envelope before pressing a seal onto it. It is a new one, my own emblem. A snowflake mixed with the colors of the rainbow to remember the fairies who helped me save Azura.

I hold it out for a raven, and it plucks it from my hand. It launches itself into the sky on its way to my father.

Belle and Azura are waiting for me, so I hurry into a simple dress before heading to the dining hall. Belle's father recently passed away due to a

poor heart. She was utterly broken, and I told her she could stay for as long as she needed. Azura has surprisingly welcomed Belle with open arms.

There were some tense moments when Belle learned Azura had altered her memories after the night they spent together. She was mad about it for a while, but I think her broken heart has been too much to bear, and she couldn't stay angry for long. Besides, Azura gave Belle access to her ancient library. It was really hard for her to stay angry after that.

Belle does seem happy, even though she has her bad days. I feel like she is missing something, but I can't tell what it is. I only hope Azura and I can help her find it.

Arriving in the dining hall, I slip into my chair beside Azura and kiss her softly.

"I sent the letter to my father," I say.

"Oh?" Azura asks, looking up at me.

I smile softly. "I told him we would be attending his wedding."

Azura takes my hand. "I know it's hard to be away from them, but it's safer."

I nod before turning my attention to Belle, who is poking at her food absently. She had a bad night. I can see it. Her lips are turned down, and her eyes are distant. Azura kisses my fingers, and I smile at her before turning my attention back to Belle.

"Belle, are you all right?" I ask.

"Mhm." She nods.

"You don't seem all right," Azura says, glancing at her.

"I'm fine," she says, placing her fork down. She stands and walks over to the window. I give Azura a worried look. Something about Azura gets Belle to open up. The two of them have similar experiences and traumas that need to be unloaded. I try to give them the space to talk about these troubles.

Just as I'm about to stand, the castle rocks and the sound of an explosion rings in my ears. Belle's face pales, and she stumbles back.

"Azura, you need to see this," she says.

Azura joins her at the window and growls, her eyes widening. "The Beast. He has come to take what's mine. My treasure."